**(Job 94600) C & A S01E02 MASTERED**

(I: Introduction N: Nicole Smith H: Hal Simons )

I: Before we begin, we’d like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land that we’re recording on, the Wurundjeri-willam clan and Taungurung people, and give our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. We encourage everyone listening to consider the Traditional Owners of the land they’re living and thriving on, and consider the benefits that may come from a treaty with the First Peoples. This is, was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

N: Welcome to the second episode of *Create and Amplify*. Thank you for listening to the first with Kath Duncan. Our guest today is Hal Simons. Hal Simons was born at a very young age. From there, to be honest, things have been a bit of a mixed bag. Their poetry brings humour to many sombre and serious topics, and wields their experiences of chronic pain, depression, grief and love, with heartwarming and heart-wrenching gusto.

Often found whirling around Melbourne, in his kilted and caffeinated form, or curled up in a dark room and napping with cats, Hal fulfils his roles in the world of cat sitter extraordinaire, disabled poet, and mischief maker on the board of Mother Tongue, a poetry organisation, with aplomb, delight and no small amount of smart-arsery. Welcome Hal.

H: Thank you. It’s wonderful to be here.

N: Thanks for being here with me. I have to say, I’ve never read the word ‘kilted’ or ‘smart-arsery’ out loud. Thanks for that.

H: I’m glad I could provide that gift for you.

N: Thank you. Let’s start with a question that I like to ask a lot of writers and bibliophiles. When did you discover the power of words?

H: Oh, good question. I think I discovered the power of written word in primary school and high school, when I would disappear into the library for as long as humanly possible. Books, for me, have always been, and continue to be, a wonderfully socially appropriate escape mechanism, and it’s a way to not exist in my own head, which is a wonderful experience. So I think reading has always been something I’ve loved.

I’m the one who will turn up at a party with a book in my pocket, go find the cat and sit in the dark room, and I’ve cultivated my friends around me to be like, oh yeah, that’s Hal’s … Hal’s here, but he’s down the other end of the house eating cheese and reading, and patting the cat.

I discovered poetry. The first poem I ever performed out loud was at my father’s eulogy, and I broke down, and I read a poem by Pablo Neruda, and I loved it. And then half a dozen years later, a friend invited me to this weird kind of open mic poetry night, which I was like, what the fuck is this? Sorry, what is this?

N: That’s okay, you can swear, we’re putting explicit all over this.

H: Oh, brilliant. Excellent. Then I’ll breathe a little easier and swear a little louder. And so they invited me out. And the problem with having, you may be able to relate, Nic, the problem with having a name that only has three letters is when they say, do you want to sign up for something, I’d already finished writing my name before I realised what I was doing. And so they’re like, “Oh, we’ve got a new poet today. His name is Hal”. And I wasn’t a poet. I hadn’t written anything. I didn’t classify myself as an artist. And so I was panicking, and I was like, okay, what do I want to read? And I had just finished reading a very short story that had hit me hard, called *The Egg* by Andy Weir. And I went, you know what poem I’ve done in the past? I’ll do that one I read at my father’s eulogy.

And so my introduction to the stage and performing in Melbourne was a pretty open-hearted, grief-filled poem. And I’ve just kind of gone from there. So when I’ve done that, talking about other things is relatively easy. So that’s a long answer to your question of when did I discover the joys of the written word.

N: Now, I’ve always found poetry quite an elusive art. And I have to say that I have tried my hand at writing a few poems, and can never quite get it the way that I want it. Have you found that, or did it come easily to you? What’s sort of your process for writing poetry?

H: One of the things I like about freeform poetry is it’s more a story. It doesn’t have to be written in rhyming couplets. It doesn’t have to be set to any particular kind of gate or framework. I’m not trying to match up. I’m not trying to make my lines rhyme. Occasionally, my poems do, but it’s mostly by accident. And so for me, it’s a telling of a story. It doesn’t need to rhyme. It doesn’t need to look any particular way. But I try to create something from my brain to make it beautiful, and for it to land with people that makes an impact. And often I succeed, and other times I don’t. And if I don’t, then I write a poem about how that poem fell flat on its face.

N: I think that’s where I get stuck with poetry, is that I get too tangled up in what the rules are supposed to be, or what it’s supposed to look like, or how it’s supposed to be read, rather than just letting it flow.

H: It’s fun to do the poems, like it’s good to have the structure. Sometimes it’s like, okay, I need this. Like a Haiku is five syllables, seven syllables and five syllables. And there’s rules around these things. And sometimes structure can be great. Sometimes it can be useful as a suggestion. I wrote a poem over lockdown called, *Oh, The Places You Won’t Go* in the style of Dr Seuss. And I’ve written one called *Nevermore*, which has Edgar Allen Poe vibes to it. And it’s fun to have these as either structures or as some kind of support. But I find that the rigid structure of, okay, this must be in Haiku format, and it follows these rules, to, I just end up being like, well, this feels like work, and I want to do work. I want to write this thing out of my head, because it won’t stop bouncing around in there.

N: I feel like it’s a real skill as well to be able to perform poetry. I’ve heard you read your poetry aloud, and it’s a completely different experience for me than reading it on the page. And I’m just wondering where you learnt that skill, or whether it just, again, came naturally to you?

H: It’s definitely something I’ve worked on over the years. Writing a poem and reading it are two separate skills, in my experience. I had a wonderful time with a friend last year where we would read each other’s poems, like record them and send them to the other person. And it changes the flavour entirely. I put a lot of thought into the words that come out of my mouth. The joys of trauma and hypervigilance, and needing to make sure that I’m not misunderstood, and all of these things fuel the fact that when I speak a sentence, whether it’s something I’ve written down or something that is, for example, in this moment, I’m running it through my head before I speak it, because I want it to be as clear as possible and land with as much of my intention as possible.

N: There must be a little bit of anxiety attached to that. Do you ever feel like you can speak freely?

H: Oh, there is so much anxiety to it. It’s a wonderful skill, but it takes its toll. As I get older, I’ve found that there are many flavours and facets to me, one of which is neuro-spiciness. And so hypervigilance, awareness of what’s going on around me, coupled with a desire to make sure people are looked after, means that my brain isn’t quiet. And there are opportunities, and there are people and situations where I have to put less effort into curating, cultivating every sentence.

But there is also, I get joy out of it. Like there is something to be said when I can choose a sentence, and it can be just in a conversation, and someone feels heard or understood, or makes a happy noise or whatever it is, that choosing the words that can cut through an entire room. And I love that.

N: Speaking of your brain being a busy place …

H: Yes.

N: … in the intro, we said that depression and chronic pain are part of your life.

H: Yes.

N: Yes.

H: Yes, he says enthusiastically.

N: Can you talk to me about your experience with that as much as you’re comfortable?

H: I’m very comfortable talking about any aspect of my world.

N: Okay. Also how your art or poetry, or let’s just say art to make it broader, has helped you with coping with chronic pain and depression.

H: Ah, excellent. So I have a chronic back injury, which means that for the better part of my life, I have always been in pain. And it is exhausting to have that. I have multiple worn discs and bulging discs, and someone in their 30s shouldn’t be diagnosed with osteoarthritis. And that has impacted what I can do in the world, as a job, mainly. We talked in the intro that my roles are cat sitter, disabled poet and mischief maker. And there’s a reason those aren’t nine to five jobs that involve me sitting in an office.

Depression for me is tied in with the injury, but it’s also tied in with grief. And my father passed away when I was in my mid-20s, and it hit me so hard. And even a dozen years, more than a dozen years later, it is still a presence. And I’ve written about him and the grief, and it’s less of a burning coal in my hand and more of a piece of hematite, a solid stone that is, it weighs heavily, but has been polished for years.

And so for me, that’s why I write about grief and depression, and chronic pain and love. And often they can be in the same poem. Often they are intermixed, like depression and grief, or depression and chronic pain, because nothing exists in a vacuum. They impact the other. And so they’re some of the things I write on.

I write on collapsing in agony and shaking, trying to just keep breathing. And I write on, I wrote a poem about sitting in the audience and listening to the poets as my body quivers in pain, and I am holding one hand open on my friend’s leg, and the other clenched so tightly in their hand. And so not only do I write on the chronic pain and disability and such, but it is a fuel. It’s a way of expressing my experiences.

And don’t get me wrong, I also have a psychologist who definitely earns his dollars, which I think is a nice balance. It’s good to have many types of support. And for me, poetry and speaking on an open mic, where I can make potentially people … potentially I can be heard, and maybe they might see themselves too.

N: Do you have a process in terms of when you’re in the throes of that pain? Do you ever write from that? Or do you wait until you’re in a better position? I know that it’s chronic, but do you wait until it lessens a little bit? Or are you best writing from the middle of that whirlpool, so to speak?

H: Often it is the middle of the whirlpool. I can’t even list the number of poems I’ve written in tears at a funeral, or in a heightened state of something going wonderful. But I need to get that down on paper, because I’m not going to hold on to that. And it’s okay if I don’t write down the line or something for future me to look at or build on, and it’s okay if that passes me by. But I need to get, I often need to get something out. And it can just be, it can be a single sentence for future me to expand on, or it can be an entire poem.

Sometimes it’s a way of dealing with the pain. I wrote one a couple of years back of relaxing with friends in a social situation, rolling off the beanbag and just collapsing. And my friends helped me find my keys and support me out to the car. And I sat in the car, tears streaming down my face and the air con on, and I wrote the poem, because that’s what helps me process.

Occasionally I’ll write a poem and it’s like, that is done. I like that. Often they’re the shorter ones that I’ve just been like, this is a thought that I’m getting out of my head. Often they will sit and bounce around in my brain and on the page for quite some time, and they’ll be edited and tweaked and shifted. But a lot of what I write is in that moment.

N: I think that’s really interesting that you say that sometimes you know it’s done. Part of my perfectionism with writing, I guess, is never quite knowing when it’s done.

H: Yep.

N: So it is quite a special moment when you have a thought and then you say or you write that thought, and then it’s done and you can put it away. That’s quite special.

H: It is. And it’s definitely something I struggle with, because there’s no ... I love computer games and such. One reason is because there’s a quest list. And when you achieve something, it ticks off the quest list. When writing, and doing many other things in the real world, there isn’t a tick box that says, well done, this poem is now complete. Feel free to release it into the world. And so some of them, I’ve just had to go, okay, this has been sitting in my hand, figuratively speaking, for six months. I am going to let this go. That took something. It is a very, it is a challenge to let go of something that doesn’t have that, I am done feeling to it.

And I’ve been doing this for ... I’ve been writing poetry for nearly 10 years now. And one of the things I’ve come to understand is I can add and change the poems that I have written. And that’s its own pathway of going, oh, cool, this is one I’ve loved and I’ve performed 50 times, but there’s another paragraph that I want to add to it. And going, okay, this was published in my first book. This was the first poem I read out to 400 people. I’m going to add to it and change it. And there’s a part of me that’s like, no, I’m not meant to do that. It’s meant to be inviolate. Once I’ve let go of it, that’s it. But there’s another part of me that says, they’re my words, I can do to them as I will.

And so one of my favourite poems is called *Neither Falling Nor Rising*. And I loved it. And a friend said, “Can you perform that? But we’ve got to do it for a G-rated audience. So can you take out the word ‘fuck’ and the more explicit parts of it?”. And I went, “I can indeed”. And then I added another paragraph to it. And then after that was finished and I did the more G-rated version, I was like, I’m going to combine all this together. And it is now *Neither Falling Nor Rising Version 2.0*.

N: Speaking of getting things out into the world, can you tell me about *The Hapless Mortal*?

H: Oh, yes. I operate under a process called panic, which I think a lot of people do. And so I’ve released three chapbooks in over my time, three chapbooks and one ebook on Amazon.

N: Can you just explain what a chapbook is?

H: Okay. Yes. A chapbook is a collection of your own works that you print at home. So essentially it’s A4 paper you’ve printed out and you’ve stapled it together yourself. It’s not high production value, but it is a way to get your words into someone’s hand. And *The Hapless Mortal*, about a year and a half ago, so it was, I guess, mid-October, a wonderful human in the poetry scene in Melbourne, Michael Reynolds, approached me and said, “Hey, Hal, short notice, but we’ve had our feature pull out for Halloween. Could you come and be our feature?”. And I went, “Yes”. And then I went, oh, that means I have to prepare things.

So I sat down with all my poems that I’ve written over the previous handful of years. And I thought to myself, you know what would be nice for people, like when they come along and they hear the poetry, I’m going to make up a page of just the poems that I read. And then I was like, oh, brilliant. I can make that, and I’ll make a set list. And then when I made the set list and I put all the poems on page, I went, this is 30 pages long. I’ve just accidentally made a book. Then I was like, OK, well, it turns out that my unexpected feature gig on Halloween in 2023 is also the release of *The Hapless Mortal*, which is one of the poems in that. And so I slipped and made a book. That was my how I introduced it.

And that seems to be the way of the last couple of chapbooks is, cool, you’ve got a feature, or, “Hey, have you got something for sale?”. And my first book before I made my first chapbook, a friend asked, “Hey, have you got a book for sale? I’m opening up a magazine store”. And I went, “No”. She’s like, “Can you?”. And so that was how my first chapbook called *Love and Other Adventures* came together.

N: I’ve heard you talk about *The Hapless Mortal* and say that you were quite shy in giving it to people, or having people buy it for you. And then your friends had to sort of take over and take it from you, and go and sell it on your behalf. Is that right?

H: Yes. It’s such a … it’s a complicated thing, but it’s like a value, a self-worth thing. It’s like, oh, this is an amazing thing that I’ve created, and it’s wonderful, but oh, no, listen, if you can’t afford it, just take the book. And a dear friend of mine, Fleassy Malay, on the night went, “Okay, get out of your own way. Give me the books. Go”. And so Fleassy walked around selling them, and that was its own terrifying experience, but it also, it made it easier for people to support me, because I wasn’t getting in the way, or trying to downplay who I am. And a certain amount of humbleness and self-assure, like being aware of who I am is great, but let’s not go too far with that. We don’t need to get it into the self-deprecation and self-destruction levels.

N: You were talking before about pre-thinking everything, and making sure everybody feels comfortable, which is lovely to have, but it’s difficult to control what people think of you, or think of your work, when your art is out in the world.

H: Yes.

N: So how did you reconcile wanting to make everybody feel comfortable and like you, for lack of a better word?

H: Yep, no, that’s an accurate way to describe it.

N: And then having something so vulnerable as a book of poetry out in the world, how did you reconcile that?

H: Much anxiety, is the short and smart-arse answer to that. It was, and it’s still, like I’m feeling it in my chest in this moment going, yeah, that’s right, Hal. Remember releasing things out into the world that people will read, and possibly misunderstand your written word? And I’m like, oh no, that’s not what I want to have happen. So there is a major part of letting go that I, when I’m speaking with someone, I can do a lot in regards to how my sentences land. When I write something down, I can put a lot of energy into it being as clear as possible, to be language that is accessible or understood. I can’t control how it’s going to be read after it sits on someone’s shelf for six years, and someone picks it up and flicks through. I can’t control how my words will land.

But the best I can do is to try and create something that is important to me, then wave it away, farewell it, and hope that it brings people joy, or tears, or whatever it is. I hope it doesn’t cause upset beyond, you know, I don’t want to be detrimental in my impact on the world, whether that is poetry, or in just generally existing. And so to let something go, and it’s with the poems that I’ve written and released, it’s with the YouTube videos that I’ve released, it’s with the audio things like this, for example, our conversation right now, I can’t control how people will hear it. But I can express myself as clearly as possible, and I have to have faith that that’s going to land as well as possible.

N: I’m going to do a sneaky callback to the first episode of this podcast, where Kath Duncan, some advice that she gave me and the listeners was that critiquing art is fine, because once you put it out into the world, it’s not you anymore. It’s a separate piece of art. So you can say, yes, I care about this deeply, and I worked on it, but it’s its own entity. And so as long as people critique the art and not you, that’s okay.

H: Yes, that one’s definitely, certainly a deeper and broader topic with separating art from artist as well. But that’s a good point. It exists, if I release a poem, it then exists as its own little self. It so happens to have my name attached to it or flavours of me. And then it has a life of its own, in a way.

N: I often think about being in Year 10 literature, and we would focus on why the author wrote the curtains as being blue, something like that. And the reality is that he just likes the colour blue. But then the reader says, oh, it’s a sombre colour, or it’s the colour of the sky, or whatever it might be. But it might just be blue, and that’s okay, too.

H: Yes. The most in-depth aspect of that can be, the reason the curtains are blue is because the curtains are blue. It doesn’t need to be, there doesn’t need to be any more depth than that.

N: I’ve noticed in a lot of your stories that you’ve told today that things have come around, one, because you’re talented, but also because of a good network of people around you. And I’m wondering how it came to be that you were in that network. How did you join the Poets of Melbourne, so to speak?

H: I think there’s different aspects to it. One is to acknowledge that I have a lot of privilege going as a, at the time of wandering into the poetry scene, a cis, heteronormative, white guy. There is a lot of privilege that comes with that. And it’s taken a lot of time and connections, or like conversations.

One thing I’m aware of, of when I walk into a space, whether it’s poetry or otherwise, is I have an ability to take up a lot of space. And I don’t just mean that physically. I am often a whirlwind in a rainbow kilt and some form of entertaining t-shirt, and I joke that I’m known in all the boroughs. It is quite easy for me to spin into a room and be the centre of attention, and I like to not abuse that privilege, that honour, that experience.

God, that sounded a bit wanky, didn’t it? Often it’s been conversations with people one-on-one, but one thing that has, that is why I have such amazing people in my world, is because I’ve got up onto the microphone and I’ve shared something that’s broken my heart, or I have spoken about something that is raw and honest and open, and there is something about vulnerability that when you see it, it’s both scary and beautiful. And so if someone sees me on a microphone, whether it can be that evening, having a chat after the gig’s finished, or years down the line, people are like, oh, that’s Hal. He expresses love or kindness or pain or whatever it is, and he is a good person to talk to. It means that when our conversation starts, we’re already at a place of connection, and I think that is one of the reasons why I have so many amazing people in my world.

N: Have you found that, as horrible as COVID was, that it assisted us in being connected? For example, you could stay at home when you were having a bad chronic pain day, and still feel connected to people online?

H: In a way. But for me, going into COVID, I shut down about 98% of my world, because at the time my housemate and my partner both had compromised immune systems. And I was, and I am now, quite a social creature, and it was, it really hit my mental health hard to not be able to share space with my people in person, to be a flash of a smile at a gig somewhere. And I tried to do a lot of the online things and connect, and I just couldn’t. It was such a removed experience.

And so for me, I’d had a lot of practice at going, hey, I don’t have the capacity to come out today. Pre-COVID and lockdown and such, I’d be like, no, actually, self-care, I’m going to stay in bed. And people would be like, that is wonderful. So COVID came around, and I was like, oh, oh, I’m now staring at these four beige walls for the next two years. Oh, this is, this is going to get some interesting poems, but it’s not going to be good for my mental health. So I struggled to stay connected with people. And I exist mostly on the internet. When I’m in person, that’s great. But most people know me as someone who posts entertaining cat photos, and links to feminist articles, and occasionally puts poems on his Facebook feed.

N: I was just saying earlier today that often when I’m scrolling Facebook, I see a meme or something that you would like, and I go to send it to you, and then realise that you’re the one who posted it.

H: I love that that’s a problem. And, and honestly, it’s not just a problem that you have. I have quite a few people who express that to me. Some of whom, one of my dear friends recently went, “I hope you haven’t seen this, but you need to”. And it had crossed my radar before, but I love that I exist in people’s heads like that.

N: You must have so much of a brand that people know if it hits on certain things, then it’s a Hal meme.

H: I love it. I was talking just yesterday about the things people send me, and it is often cat videos and assorted things, a variety of memes from the wholesome, to the grievy, to the debaucherous. And people also send me links to t-shirts, because I like to put my personality into my t-shirts. And if they send it to me at first thing in the morning before I’ve got the restriction in place to not impulse buy the shiny thing, I end up with a new t-shirt coming my way. And I like that people see me in such a way, I love when they see me they go, “Oh, that’s something Hal would enjoy”. And then they realise I’ve posted it, or I was shopping the other week and someone went, “Oh, that’s a shirt that Hal would wear”. And I turned around, and it was Hal already wearing the shirt, which made me laugh very hard in a public space.

N: Could I put you on the spot, and ask you to tell me one of the slogans from one of your favourite shirts?

H: Okay, so I’ll mention the shirt I wore yesterday, and I have it in three separate colours because I love wearing the shirt, and it makes strangers laugh, and I’m glad we’ve got the explicit warning at the start of this. It says ‘average dick energy’ on it. And I love wearing it. It brings me joy, it sums up my desire to set realistic expectations in all things. I was wearing it the other week, and I was walking across St Kilda Road here in Melbourne, and it’s a busy road. And coming the other way was a woman probably in her mid-20s, and she just, she laughed and said that I’d made her day.

And I love that, that impact on a stranger that I have made their world slightly brighter, and I will not know anything else. I won’t know any of the ripples from that. But I can make someone laugh, and I can make someone feel safer or more comfortable, or it’s a conversation starter, and I love that. It’s so much so that if I wear shorts and a plain t-shirt and I put sunglasses on, my mum barely recognises me.

N: I have a new marketing strategy for you.

H: Yes?

N: Where whenever someone laughs at your t-shirt, you should hand them a book.

H: Congratulations, your laughter has won you a poem.

N: Yes. Now a few years ago I learnt about Mother Tongue.

H: Yes.

N: And then completely separately I learnt that you were intimately associated with Mother Tongue. Could you just let me know, or let the listeners know about Mother Tongue, what it is, and how you became involved?

H: Happily. Mother Tongue is an event that was created about a dozen years ago by an amazing human named Fleassy Malay, and it has been running, it was running monthly for about the last 10 years, 11 years, and we’ve shifted it to once every two months for sustainability and managing it around a post-COVID-y kind of, post-lockdown at least.

And I was invited along six or seven years ago to a Mother Tongue, and there are many things I love about it. A major one is that it is a space for women’s voices. If your identity falls somewhere under the umbrella of women, or woman, you are welcome on the stage. And mine doesn’t. So I get a beautiful experience of not stressing about whether I’m going to perform, or what I’m going to write, or what I’m going to perform, or what, anything I need to be. I can curl up on a beanbag with a chai and loved ones around me, and witness some of the most heartfelt, raw, heart-wrenching poems and experiences. And it is such, it has such an impact, and I love it.

So I was just going along as a participant and punter, and often winning the raffle, which was nice. And four or five years ago, just before the start of 2020, Fleassy approached me and said, “Hey, I want to turn Mother Tongue into a not-for-profit organisation, I’d like you to be a part of it”. And I went, “What, meh, this, huh?”. And so after a lot of howl-making squeaky noises, and about a year of communication, we worked out that my role officially is mischief maker. Which is brilliant, because I have that on a t-shirt, it’s on the paperwork that we can have it on. Unfortunately, it turns out that banks and such don’t have mischief maker as a potential role, but we’re changing that.

N: I love that so much. I love it. I’m going to put you on the spot, and I’m going to ask you to introduce and then read one of your favourite poems.

H: Oh, excellent. Okay. So I love a lot of my poems. I love all of my poems, to varying degrees of cherishing, or what they might mean to me. This is one … and sometimes I love them because of how they flow, or I love them because of the situation that they came from, or the impact they’ve had. And this one, I love this poem. It’s called *A High I Chase*.

There is a high that I chase, a drug I crave, the endorphins that I need, the hit of dopamine, the escape that I long for. It is an elusive creature. After years of tracking its habits and patterns, I still only get it once or twice a year, enough to keep me hooked but not enough to satiate.

I have found it in little cafes in Paris, hostels in Berlin and Edinburgh, from the hands of friends, or darkened little stores in lost laneways. Luck occasionally winds my path to where I need to be.

I have hunted it in lofts and attics, covered in bird poop, dust and grime, both myself and my quarry. I have heard whispers on the wind that it might be found at certain sails on particular days.

I still hunt for this elusive prey. The hit, when I find it, oh, the tears that flow. My heart, it soars, and I smile, and for a moment I am free.

I then caress my vanquished friend. Dog-eared and moth-eaten, it has given me the hit I need. It has not been made lesser, and it is to be cherished.

A world that I have delved into so deep that I get to forget my own. I am standing there, on the inn’s steps, or at the house at the end of the world, or an Ankh-Morpork on the Disc, or drinking in Callahan’s Crosstime Saloon, somewhere lost in another place and time. I have walked across their worlds, drank at their rivers and bars, sat on their hills, and kissed the pretty maidens. I’ve kissed the pretty knights too.

My heart soars, and then the comedown, the hit of reality once more, the jolt as I land back in this world. I lovingly add the book to my collection, a once spectacular high, now a pale reminder of it. I often revisit the pages, the worlds, the people, and sometimes, just sometimes, I find that high again. Often, though, I must keep hunting for the next book I’ve never heard of, but now can’t live without.

Thank you.

N: I don’t know what to say, except I forgot where I was for a moment. I was just listening going, wow, that was amazing, thank you.

H: Thank you.

N: What was the last book that you can’t live without? When was the last time you read a book, or heard a poem, and went, wow?

H: I’m currently rereading a series online. And I love that books can be anything from the thing I find at the op shop, to things that have been sitting on my shelf for 100 years, to something that exists on my Kindle. I’m reading a series again for the second time online, and it’s a science fiction escape, and it is one of those beautiful, like such involved worlds. And I love it because I can see, I get to experience, I get to witness that world, and it doesn’t have a character named Hal with chronic back pain and depression. It has these wonderful, fantastical creatures, human and otherwise, and it’s a beautiful escape.

N: Do you remember the name of it?

H: I was just looking it up, and the thing is, it’s a, it falls under a broader heading of *Humanity, Fuck Yeah*. It’s a style of writing about humanity making its way out to the stars, and usually messing things up in wonderfully supportive and excellent ways. And I highly recommend reading anything that falls under the heading of *Humanity, Fuck Yeah* or the Kevin Jenkins Universe. If you feel like losing 200 hours or more to 100 different chapters, more than. I’m glad it doesn’t keep track of how many chapters I’ve read.

N: I wanted to get your thoughts on something. Society, I feel like I’ve been getting your thoughts for this whole episode, but I wanted to get your thoughts specifically on the fact that society often rewards people who are doing the most, and busyness is seen as a good trait to have. And the more that you accomplish, the more valued you are, it seems to be, in this capitalist society. How have you come to terms with chronic pain and depression sometimes stopping you from being able to produce things that society would like you to produce?

H: Yeah, definitely. I love the question, and it’s definitely something that’s been in my brain since more than a decade. I finished up a job because I couldn’t … it was an office job. It was part of what I trained to do, but I couldn’t do it, due to how angry and inflamed my back was. And I remember finishing up and going, I’m going to take four to six weeks off. I’m going to let my back heal. I’m going to do a bit of exercise, and then I’ll be able to get back to work.

And one aspect of the following months and years is accepting that that isn’t how I can be. And I should know what the word of the opposite of entwining something is, but separating my worth as a human being, separate from what I do for work, and what is my job. And unsurprisingly, I have written a poem about it. Because we’re asked, what do you do? And that is usually, what do you do for work? How do you spend your energy? How do you contribute to a capitalistic society? And I had to separate my worth from that. Because I didn’t have a job that was, that I could tie it to.

And it’s been a process, it’s been a process to work out my worth that isn’t tied in with the things I do for a job. And I love the world I’ve created with poetry and writing, and friendships and social aspects, that every single space that I can think of understands that if I need to bail, whether it is not turn up at an event, or be there for 10 seconds, or be there in a particular way, that they are welcoming and supportive. And that my friends do not hear me say, “Hey, I need to go”, and take it personally, take it as a reflection of them. And I love that I can have those connections, that when my back is being particularly angry, or my brain is particularly dark, that I still have, I can still be a contribution.

Even in my absence, I had a friend of mine express to me that they love when I say no to things and look after myself, because it allows them to do so too. And I love that that’s how I land sometimes.

N: How did you learn to do that? Because it is wonderful to have friends that are that accepting. But I also imagine that you would be somebody that knows your needs quite clearly, and is able to express them in a clear way. How did you learn that’s okay to do?

H: In a way, I learned the importance of it by not doing it. I spent the first two decades of my life being someone who did everything possible to make those around me happy, to the detriment of my own health and wellbeing. I married my high school sweetheart at the ripe old age of 18, because I knew it would make her happy. We bought a house shortly after. I didn’t even see the house before we bought it. But I did it because I knew it would make her happy. So that’s just to illustrate how often I’ve gone in that direction, to then find myself in my early 20s, mid-20s, and having a body that was falling apart, and a world that my father wasn’t in anymore, meant that I had to express, “Hey, I can’t do this”.

And I learned to do it through all the times I pushed through. And, you know, if it’s an emergency situation, right, I will make this happen. And future Hal will pay the price of exerting energy to make something happen. A friend is in need, right, I will support you. But it then is understanding the cost of these things, and going, I would love to go out and see you today, but I don’t have the spoons. I don’t have the capacity. And cultivating the friendships that will hear that and go, “I am really glad you’re looking after you”. And I’m sure I’ve had other friendships that are, “Oh, Hal, why don’t you just get over it?”. But they don’t seem to last long in my world, or at least they don’t remain close. Does that make sense?

N: That makes absolute sense. I am left here thinking that it sounds like you’ve had multiple lifetimes in one.

H: It certainly feels that way sometimes. I grew up in a small country town, and I married my high school sweetheart. She was my first girlfriend. I was engaged at 17, married at 18, bought the house at 19, separated at 20, divorced by 21, in Europe by the time I was 22. And then I had to learn all of this, how do you talk to someone who you find attractive, thing? Coupled with my father passed away after a long battle with cancer in my mid-20s. And I remember barely being able to walk, using one of his walking sticks, because my body was collapsing. And then with the understanding more and more that my injury is not going to go away. The chronic nature of disability, that I then can’t have my worth tied in with what I do, or what I do for a job, because I can’t do something nine to five.

I joke that I am an old man trapped inside a younger man’s body, which is unfortunately accurate, it feels at times, but I love being able, I love that my experiences in life have allowed me to be like, cool, I’ve done the people pleasing thing. I’ve done the somewhat self-destructive choices of things. What balance can I find in there? And it still ends up with me eating tiramisu for breakfast, but it seems to be less detrimental in the world around me.

N: We’ve all done that, I think.

H: Yeah.

N: Your father and your relationship with him, and the subsequent grief, seems to be so intrinsic in the sort of artist that you are, the sort of poet that you are, the sort of person that you are, that I feel like it would be remiss if I didn’t ask you to tell me a little bit about him, as much as you feel comfortable.

H: I’m happy to talk about him. I have mentioned him a couple of times in this podcast, so I guess it’s only fair to kind of expand on that a little bit. My father fought cancer for about a decade. And when he finally lost that battle, I thought, and in the months and years after he passed, I thought, okay, this grief will resolve itself. There will be a point where I am not broken when I think of him, when I hear him in my thoughts. And it’s an understandable position to be in, of hoping that or knowing that that grief would fade. But for me, it hasn’t gone away, and I don’t think it will.

I don’t know who I would be if I didn’t have that grieving part of me. It’s a big part of who I am, even if it isn’t, even if I’m not grieving and moping around the house, or writing poetry about him every day, or crying, all of which are valid things to do, it is an intrinsic part of who I am. There’s Hal. Entertaining t-shirt, kilt, smartarse, polyamorous, writes wonderful poetry about grief, love and pain. Those are often ways that I am seen.

N: Sounds like somebody that I’d love to spend more time around.

H: Happily.

N: I just wanted to ask you, because I’m fascinated in the concept of disability pride, how that works, or how you relate to that, when you’ve developed your disability. So could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with the word ‘disabled’, and then disability pride?

H: Yeah, happily. For me, my disability is invisible. When someone looks at me, they can’t tell that I have had three different types of painkillers with breakfast, and that a part of my spine doesn’t exist. And so for me, in times past, I’ve needed a cane to walk around. And it served many purposes. One is I look dapper wandering around, and a very dashing human, even if I wasn’t dashing anywhere.

N: It’s very stylish.

H: Thank you. I liked it as an addition to kilt, an entertaining t-shirt, and then which cane shall I pick for today? It also helped me walk, which was, you know, that’s always a useful thing for mobility aids. But it also was an indicator that the bald guy with a beard and tattoos and a nose ring sitting in the disabled seats on the bus, isn’t just there because he doesn’t give a crap and he’s taken up space. It’s an indicator that actually I’m allowed to be there. And I carried the cane, and I carry the cane, mainly to cut out those conversations. But also even just to cut out that that’s how I might occur to somebody.

I dislike, I guess, being misunderstood. And I was about to say, I would hate to be a reason that someone feels the world is a bit shittier, because there’s this guy who is just sitting in the disabled seats, and he didn’t need them. And so I, I talk, I express, I am very open about my battles with disability and chronic pain. And it is an identifier. Also caffeinated, smartarse, kinky and a few other things. But disabled is one that I wear proudly.

And I think a part of that is also that I can. There is a, it feels also a way of using the power I have in an environment to, I guess, to bring it up. Like, there’s a reason I wear t-shirts with pink and unicorns on them. There’s a reason I wear nail polish, is because somewhere I will live in someone’s head that it’s like, oh, that’s not my normal thing that I see, but it’s okay that it exists.

And so I use the cane. I talk about the pain that I’m in. If someone says, “Hey, how are you?”, I’ll choose my response, but they’ll usually get an honest one, of some varying degree. Like, don’t get me wrong. I’m not going to unleash half an hour of honest response to that to a cashier. But I won’t just respond with, I’m fine. And there’s a privilege in that and a power in that. And I guess that’s why I write on disability, write from a space of being disabled. And I’m as open as possible about that.

N: Having chronic pain and depression, and being a poet or an artist, or any kind actually, doesn’t help the most financially. Our society isn’t set up to recognise that as much.

H: No.

N: You can be as political or not as you like with this answer. What is something that the government or society could do as a whole, in general, I suppose, to help you better live the life that you want to live, or make it easier for you at least?

H: I think one aspect, or one part of that was my many-year battle with Centrelink to have the disability support pension approved. And it feels like the process for that was specifically designed to be as detrimental and as painful as possible, to discourage anyone from applying. And how dare they want to live above the poverty line? What fucking madness is that?

And so I think my world would have benefited from not having a couple, like a two or three-year long battle with paperwork and doctors and bureaucracy, to try to be seen. Because during that time, you’re still expected to look for work, or to put in job applications, or meet certain needs. And I’m there shaking in pain, living off food parcels from friends, and playing how mouldy is too mouldy with food, while trying to meet the needs of an organisation that doesn’t care.

N: There’s something ironic to me about having to look for work as part of the criteria, but then knowing that you are unable to do the work anyway.

H: Yes, there’s a sense of like, oh, you need to meet these requirements. I’m like, if I get out of bed and don’t fall down a flight of stairs, I’m having a good day. I am way down the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs before I can look at finding work or meeting particular requirements to be somewhere for a particular set of time, and behave in a particular way. I can’t manage those on my best day.

N: That resolved itself as far as it can?

H: Yes. So I fought for a disability support pension for many years and I thankfully got onto it, with amazing formal supports like my psychologist and my GP, but also informal supports like friends and loved ones who, when I said living off food parcels, that wasn’t hyperbole, that was people delivering food to my door, and then waiting patiently as I stagger.

I’m just remembering those times of, what can I make out of this food? Well, I’ll chop the mouldy bits off and I’ll make soup. And that was the only thing I could do. And these days I dip back into the disability support pension application process to support friends, because if I can save anyone some of the heartache to get the DSP application approved, I will happily dip back into that if I can save them some heartache.

N: I’m so sorry that you had to go through that.

H: Thank you.

N: All that time spent filling out forms could have been spent writing more poetry.

H: Yes. I would also have loved for that time to be spent just laying down, just resting, not having to force a broken body and mind to deal with, to deal with strangers who are burnt out by a system, or to try and explain my world in 60 words or less to them. To meet a criteria written by someone who doesn’t have to worry about where the next meal is coming from.

N: So I think after our conversation today, a lot of people are going to love you, and a lot of people, I imagine, are going to want to support you. Are there ways that they can do so? I know that at one point you had a Patreon. Can you just go through some examples of how people can support you?

H: Wonderful. I love hugs. So if you see me out in the world being delightful, please say, “Hey Hal, can I have a hug?”. I have a Patreon, which has been very supportive, and the folks who support me on that are wonderfully kind. Because I struggle to do updates and things, but it allows, there’s different tiers, but essentially for a dollar a month, you get access to everything I’ve written. A Dropbox folder called The Vault, that contains 100 and something poems. And that’s a financial way.

If you feel like buying, I have a book on Amazon called *Five Stages* that is about grief. Or if you buy a chapbook off me sometime, or drop me a line, I exist on the internet, on Facebook. If you type Hal Simons in, I don’t think there’s going to be too many others. And I am more than happy to work out how to get my words into your head, or just receive a, hey, I heard this and it’s great. Or, I heard this and I cried. That’s wonderful feedback too.

N: To finish up, Hal, do you have any feedback, that you are at liberty to say, obviously, that has really stuck with you about the work that you’ve done, or the poems that you’ve written?

H: Yes. And I think this also falls a little bit under the heading of, how people can support me or provide support. Be kind to the people in your world who are hurting, who are grieving. There is no set pathway for healing, whether it is a broken heart or a broken body. Be gentle with them and be gentle with yourselves. And that it’s okay if you, if the only thing you do today is just exist.

N: Thank you so much. That’s wonderful. I hope that that was okay?

H: That was, I really loved, this was wonderful. And I really love, I am honoured to be invited on, and I really love our chats. And thank you so much, Nic.

N: Thank you so much for your time and your energy and your thoughtfulness in your answers. I’m going to leave it there, but thank you so much, and I’m sure we’ll talk online soon.

H: I would love that. Thank you again, Nic. It has been an absolute pleasure to spend the last chunk of time with you. Thank you so much for having me be a part of what you’re creating.

N: Thank you.

H: Thank you.

N: What a great conversation. Thank you again to Hal Simons. The links to Hal’s Patreon and publications are available in the show notes.

*Create and Amplify* is assisted by the Australian government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body. Thank you Creative Australia, and thank you for listening.

[end of recording]