

HIGH PROFILES

Ruby Wax

The comic writer and performer, campaigner on mental-health issues and champion of mindfulness interviewed by ***Simon Parke*** over the phone

11 January 2017

Mind How You Go

Ruby Wax

is a comic writer and performer who has lately become known as a campaigner on mental-health issues and a champion of mindfulness. **Simon Parke** called her on the road.



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Are you happy?

Well, yeah, my new book¹ hit number one yesterday, so I *am* happy.

Does the success of the book matter to you?

Yeah, it does. It's an acknowledgement that you worked hard and, you know, you weren't just sitting alone in a room, pondering life.

Is success still a stimulant for you?

Well, otherwise why would you write, if nobody read your book? Or if you did a show and nobody was in the audience, wouldn't that disturb you?

Do you redefine success as life goes on, or is the biggest buzz still being number one?

Well, no, my buzz is that I'm researching for my next book. That's my kick. I'm working

with a monk and a neuroscientist. [I'm ranging] much wider now. I can ask them what I want to ask and their answers are so satisfying, because it's everything I ever wanted to know.

To some extent, I suppose, your attitude to success depends on what gives you identity...

Well, that's what I'm writing the new book about. I mean, it's partly genetics, partly experience, partly mechanics – different sections of the brain that are working together – you know, that have that autobiographical memory. They give you your identity – but actually there is no *real* identity.

So, identity is really an illusion?

Well, it's something we need for our survival. We need it to keep going.

You have a lot of 'identities': you're Jewish-Austrian, American, British, you're a comedian, a mental-health campaigner, an Officer of the British Empire. Do any of those labels mean anything much to you?

I don't think it's good to be stuck with any label, even 'male' or 'female' or how old you are. Deep down inside, it doesn't bear a lot on who you really are.

Is there a Ruby you can sit with who is completely label-free but you know who they are?

Well, that's why you do mindfulness, to sort of get in touch with that part. When you do mindfulness, there's no label: you're being more the observer than you are, you know, living with a mask on.

So, in a way mindfulness reminds us that we have no identity, that everything is just passing through?

Yeah, but not in a frightening way. Just, you don't have to latch on.

On the very last page of *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled*, you say: 'I feel a little sad that I'm no longer so gripped by the persona I worked so hard to create. ... I feel now like I've busted myself.' It's really interesting that as we grow up we each have to dismantle our personality –

Yeah, you spend the first half building it up and then you take it down. Yeah.

I wonder what your experience of that has been.

I just love the neuroscience of it.

If you stop your habits of thinking, which *are* your persona, you're not left with nothing – it actually makes you more available to be multidimensional, you know, so that's liberating, not terrifying.

But many people are afraid to dismantle their persona because they think: My persona is all there is.

If you stop your habits of thinking, it actually makes you more available to be multidimensional, and that's liberating

Then they should either read my book or read a science book! [People used to be] terrified that the earth was flat and they'd fall off, so...

Why do you say you 'feel a little sad' that you're no longer 'gripped' by your persona?

Well, I'm sad I'm not a child any more either. I'm sad that I can't go to camp. We're always sad when we lose something. I miss yesterday, so I'm sad.

I always feel, watching Ricky Gervais, he's having trouble letting go of the character David Brent. He's finding it hard to move on because there's so much of *him* there.



Did you read that?

No, that's just my observation.

A lot of comedians who play characters get stuck and a lot of them aren't very happy as a result. It's kind of sad when you see an older person trying to pretend they are this 30-year-old persona. So, yeah, you have to move on – or you suffer.

Do you feel you're going to have to move on from your own comic persona, or is that always going to be an important part of you?

Well, it's not my persona, it's just the rhythm of how I speak. It's like your accent is part of you. I just speak funny. I'm not trying to *be* funny, it comes out funny sometimes. I'm slightly dyslexic, so that comes out as comedy.

Well, it's not just the way you speak. You're a very witty person.

When I'm alone, I see life from a pretty funny angle; but then I use that for my job. So, you know, if I need a job, boy, can *I* be funny! Because that's my schtick.

In a sense, you use comedy to make a point.

Yeah. But with my friends it still comes out.

I'll bet it does.

Not all the time. Not all the time.

So, you're not going to struggle at all with letting go of your comic persona?

I already did leave that one. It took a few years to unpeel it, but – it's there when I need it and I don't feel panicked when it leaves me, because I know it's just...

Funny and funny persona are two different things.

How would you define mindfulness for someone who keeps hearing the term but doesn't really know what it is?

Oh, you know, I can't be blocked into that. It's simple but it's complicated. It took a long time to figure out how to phrase it in the book and I don't want to do a search for it now. I could give you a fluffy one-liner, but I like the mechanics: I'd have to teach you a little bit about how your mind works – not detailed, but it exercises a part of your brain that gives you focus. That means you're not [prey to] distraction so much.

Mindfulness exercises part of your brain that gives you focus?

That *allows* you to focus.

OK. And the science of it is important to you?

Yeah, really important.

You pull off something difficult in the book, because it's funny and self-deprecating and comedy is quite fast, but of course mindfulness is about slowing and stilling.

No, I don't agree with you. You can be running, in my book, and still be mindful. The *exercise* [of mindfulness] slows you down, like a ballerina at a barre, but you don't get slower in life, you just get sharper.

It means I'm more relaxed on stage – or I'm thinking, 'Why am I working so hard here? I don't need to' – so I can pull it down a few notches. But it's not about slowing down.

I suppose you could be running but still have a slow mind.

I wouldn't say 'slow', I'd say 'uncluttered'. I know monks who work at a rate of knots!

Yes, 'uncluttered' is good. All the same, some writing on mindfulness is quite stilling, whereas in general comedy is quite punchy.

Well, that's why I think some of those books are really boring. I think [that] either you're brilliant, like Mark Williams,² or you're imitating him and you're dull. People who haven't got Mark's skill and assume they can write a mindfulness book are pretty wrong. They're saying the same thing over and over again.

Mindfulness has its origins in Buddhist practice. Do you think it has any particular religious affiliation?

A lot of shrinks come from Buddhism but mindfulness doesn't make you a Buddhist, it's just neat. It could have [come from] anything – it could have been Christianity.

So, for you it's meaning-free – you don't have to have any belief system to practise it?

No, none.

Does mindfulness give you meaning, or is meaning not important for you?

You know, there's no black box – or a fortune cookie with your 'meaning' on a piece of paper. People dig and dig and dig [for meaning] and mindfulness is just letting you be

People dig and dig and dig for meaning, and if that's your thing, go ahead and dig! But at least mindfulness ensures that you don't get addicted to digging

more present rather than digging all the time.

But if that's your thing, then go ahead and dig! But if you want to dig, then at least [mindfulness ensures that] you don't get addicted to digging.

You quote the line that if you repeat your thoughts they become an action, if you repeat an action it becomes a habit, if you repeat a habit it creates a persona and a fixed persona becomes your destiny. Do you feel that your experience of mindfulness has changed your destiny?

Well, yeah, I'm doing shows about mindfulness, so of course that's changed my destiny.

Has it changed what you want from life?

Yeah, I just want to be alone with – I want to study those books and then I want to do a show. And then I want to have, you know, a good time.

I can create my own work now, I'm not dependent on other people to give me a job, so that's quite liberating.

Sure. And now you're still an entertainer but you're an entertainer with a cause.

Yeah, that's pretty good, yeah.

Everything you do now seems to be concerned with mental health or mindfulness.



Yeah, well, that's it *now*. I can't tell what's going to happen in the next few years!

You might go off in a new direction?

Maybe, I don't know. You know, I didn't stay as one thing ever, so who knows what's next?

Would you enter the political arena if someone asked you to speak out on some issue?

Oh, no, I'm not political, no. You know, it's not my – it's like being an academic: it's just not interesting. I mean, I *care* but once [something has] happened I'm not going to spend my energy fighting it.

What did you think when Theresa May said we must do more for mental health?³

Oh, I applaud her. It's about time – somebody finally has their eyes opened to why so much money is being drained out of the country, because of people's mental disabilities. And we're suffering. So, good for her!

Some people might say it's just talk.

Well, let's see how far it goes. At least she talked!

What does sanity look like?

No idea. How would I know?

So, when we talk about 'mental health'...?

It's on a spectrum, like physical health.

Are there no human characteristics that would be signs of sanity?

No. There would be signs of *insanity*.

Only signs of insanity?

Well, sanity to me means being flexible in your thoughts and not rigid. Open-mindedness would be a sign of san-- of wellbeing.

I think spontaneity is important as well -

Exactly.

- but that's quite similar.

Yeah, very similar. It means that nothing's getting in the way. There's no distraction.

It came out that I had depression, so I wrote a show and just performed it in institutions - and then it turned out that everybody identified with it

We spoke of happiness at the start. Is happiness something you grow into, or is it something that just comes and goes and will do all your life?

I think it's something that comes and goes, all your life, but you do get a little more contented sometimes. When you have a freer brain - I don't know if that's happiness, but it's easier to live.

I think you have said that your primary addiction is rage...

Yeah, that's one of my habits. I notice it comes up a lot.

You've talked in the past about therapy. Does it help you to see where the rage comes from?

Oh, I don't need somebody to talk me through where it comes from - and if I think about it, it fuels the rage. But if I just feel the rage and sit with it, then the body picks it up and can deal with it, rather than me ruminating about it.

Is therapy still part of your life?

Well, no, because mindfulness is a way of tuning in every day and just watching what's going on and then accepting it; and that's what therapy is, pretty much.

So, mindfulness actually -

Is a therapy. And anyone can do it.

And all they have to do is buy your book!

Well, they have to practise it. Even if they read Mark's book, they have to practise it.

I think you've said that the hardest thing in life is compassion.

Yeah – for me.

Is that because you have the sort of mind that judges people –

Automatically? Yeah. But you can work at it like a muscle, so it's something I'm trying to train myself to.

Do you feel more open to compassion nowadays?

Yeah, much more.

And that's because of what? You *notice* when you're judging?

You're doing your best, so who am I to judge you? You know? You're not trying to ruin my day, so why would I get angry?

You have written and performed very powerfully around depression in your stand-up show *Losing It...*

That was a few years back!

What sort of experience was that?

There was a reason I did it, because [it came out] that I had depression, so I wrote a show and just performed it in institutions – and then it turned out that everybody identified with it and so it became a real show in the theatre.

And what *is* depression? What does it feel like for you?

It's just a numbness, as if you had the flu but you can't get up. It's a very different sensation from being sad or in mourning. It's an inability to pick up anything, or make a decision.

And does it just *arrive*, like a dark shadow falling across you?

Well, now it doesn't – because of mindfulness I can see it coming.

And what can you do about it?

You can't. You can only unravel your busy schedule, you cancel all your appointments and you just lie low, because then you don't get stress on top of stress. You don't get depressed about depression, so it passes much quicker. But you can't prevent it. *I* don't think you can.

And don't beat yourself up about it.

Yeah, don't be ashamed about it. So, then it's not shame on top of stress on top of depression, it's just the depression – which is bad enough.

In his endorsement of your book, Stephen Fry praised your 'searing honesty'. What does honesty cost you – or is it just part of the routine?

I don't even think about it. It's just the way I am.

You don't feel you're risking yourself by making these personal revelations?

No. I don't know what that feels like. Certain things I don't say...

Actually, I don't find myself that interesting; but I give examples [from my own life] and say, 'This is how I am' and people go: Oh, yeah, that's how I am, too.

Do you celebrate your past achievements?

You mean have drinks parties about how successful I am?

No, just feel inside: This has been a really great journey!

Oh, I think it's been a great journey. I don't really go down Memory Lane a lot, but I know how lucky, blessed, whatever, I am. I have a really good deal. I know that.

I don't really go down Memory Lane a lot, but I know how lucky, blessed, whatever, I am. I have a really good deal. I know that

What are you most proud of doing?

Probably *some* of the interviews⁴ – not all of them, some. And getting into Oxford, to study mindfulness and the brain, was for me pretty sensational. And then finding something I really am interested in is a gift.

But you sit light to most of your past achievement?

I don't really think about it a lot, because I think *this* is so interesting.

The self-help 'industry' has become huge, hasn't it?

Well, I have to make a distinction. To me, self-help is more 'Hug your angel' or 'Wish for something good'. There's a difference when somebody uses scientific evidence, even in comedy. I think I am taking from some really fine minds.

One of the dangers of the 'industry' is that it needs to keep people dissatisfied to keep going and so it creates its own sort of striving –

Yeah, definitely. If you're not 'positive', you're wrong.

Do you find it hard to write about mindfulness without encouraging a new sense of striving that creates new possibilities of failure?

That's the downfall of that, yeah. But if somebody's doing yoga and they do a backbend and they break their spine, I would assume they're doing the yoga wrong. You know what I mean? I'm not in charge of how you take it. If you say, 'I've meditated for eight hours!', well... Good luck! But mindfulness is anti-striving.

It's just allowing what is.

Yeah. I mean, there's nothing wrong with striving. If you're aware of it, that's fine; and if you're striving and you're content, then go ahead!

Do you feel that you are striving? And if so, is it in a good way?

Sometimes, and sometimes not. You know, as long as I'm interested, it's not creating stress, it's just creating oomph – and you need that, otherwise you're lazy. You know, or it's a very dissatisfied life.

You sound like you lead a very active life. Is that so?

Well, it is now – but last month I was lying on a lounge for about a month, so, you know, sometimes, sometimes not. I try to balance it.

You've said that you now find it easier to be alone. Is that something new?

No, I've been that way for a long time, but I – I – I strive for that sometimes. You know, you have to listen to the voice [that says] I don't have to show up at everything. Which is hard, but then I know I'll go over, you know, the top.

Are you still seeking attention, or do you feel you've had enough?

Well, now I can pay attention, rather than getting attention. That's the big gift.

I recognise that, but is getting attention still as important to you?

Not – not – no. I mean, I write my book and then it happens to be number one. That's great, but I wasn't writing it every day so that I would be number one, I was interested in the topic.

The getting to number one is just a blessing?

Yeah, it's a blessing.

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The screenshots are taken by permission from <http://bigthink.com/videos/ruby-wax-on-neuroplasticity>.

1 *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled* (Penguin Life, 2016)

2 Professor of clinical psychology and Wellcome Principal Research Fellow at Oxford University, and co-author with Danny Penman of *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world* (Piatkus, 2011)

3 See bit.ly/2lk4gxx.

4 Chiefly in the series *The Full Wax* (1991–94), *Ruby Wax Meets...* (1994–98) and *Ruby Wax with...* (2003)

Biography

Ruby Wax (née Wachs) was born in Evanston, Illinois in 1953, the only child of two refugees. She was educated at Evanston Township High School and studied psychology at Berkeley.

She moved to Britain in 1977 and studied at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. She started out as a straight actress at the Crucible Theatre in Sheffield, where she began a long writing and directing partnership with Alan Rickman. She joined the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1978 and over five years appeared in *Measure for Measure*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Way of the World* and Howard Brenton's three-hander *Sore Throats*.

In 1979, she began writing for BBC TV's sketch show *Not the Nine o'Clock News*. With Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Tracey Ullman, she co-wrote and starred in the ITV sitcom *Girls on Top* (1985–86). In 1987, Channel 4 gave her her own comedy chat show, *Don't Miss Wax*. *Miami Memoirs* and *East Meets Wax* (both 1988) and *Wax on Wheels* (1988–89) followed.

She moved to BBC1 in 1991, for the comedic talk show *The Full Wax*. In '94, *Ruby Wax Meets Madonna* launched the series *Ruby Wax Meets...*, in which she interviewed, among others, Imelda Marcos, Pamela Anderson and the Duchess of York (which got an audience of more than 14 million and was nominated for a Bafta award). This series ran until 1998.

It was followed by *Ruby's American Pie* (1999), in which she interviewed Donald Trump; *Ruby Gets Streetwise* (2000); the quiz show *The Waiting Game* (2001–02), which she presented; *Commercial Breakdown* and *The Ruby Wax Show* (both 2002) and *Ruby Wax with...* (2003).

From 1992 to 2012, she was the script editor for the BBC1 sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*. She wrote many of its one-liners, and appeared in two episodes.

In 2006, she did a postgraduate certificate in psychotherapy and counselling at Regent's College (now University) London. She became patron of the charity Depression Alliance in 2009. Her 2010–11 stand-up show *Losing It*, which evolved into *Ruby Wax: Out of Her Mind* and toured worldwide, led her to set up the website sane.org.uk (now part of the charity Sane).

In 2012, she completed a master's degree in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy at Kellogg College, Oxford. In 2015, she was appointed a visiting professor in mental-health nursing at the University of Surrey.

She now teaches business communication.

She is the author of *Ruby's Health Quest: And the Answers* (1995) with Alan Maryon-Davis; the best-selling memoir *How Do You Want Me?* (2002); the number-one best-seller *Sane New World: Taming the mind* (2014); and *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled* (2016).

She was appointed an OBE in 2015 'for services to mental health'. She has an honorary doctorate from the University of East London.

She has been married since 1988 to her third husband, and has three adult children.

Up-to-date as at 1 February 2017