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John Moe: A note here at the top. This episode contains some pretty frank discussion of suicide.

True story: I was hired to write a movie screenplay once. Don't look for it. It never got made—the fate of many screenplays. And when they hired me, the producer said, “Yeah, just follow the three-act formula, and we'll be good.”

And I said, “Oh, okay.” And then I quickly googled three-act formula movies. And it turned out to be a pretty simple one. Hero is living a routine life. Something intrudes on that. That's act one. Act two, hero goes on a journey to make things right and meets increasingly difficult challenges. Act three, hero faces a challenge so difficult, so enormous that there's no way they'll conquer it. And yet somehow, often using the skills they learned in act two and their secret heroic nature from back in act one, somehow they win. They return to a version of their former life stronger and wiser and better off and happily ever after—unless there's a sequel. And I realized it's in most big movies.

Luke Skywalker, the boy moisture farmer, gets a message from a princess. Off he goes. Has battles, finally blows up the Death Star, gets a medal.

Frodo is in the Shire. Gandalf shows up. Ring. Gollum. Sauron. He throws the ring in the goo, comes back to the Shire.

Romantic comedies, spy thrillers—same formula, basically. *Shawshank Redemption*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*.

The reason the formula keeps getting used is that people like it. They wanna identify with the hero. They want to live vicariously through that hero and conquer challenges, including the big act three challenge. Seeing the hero conquer their life's challenges makes us think—or at least fantasize—about conquering our own life and our own challenges. When movies deviate from the formula—and some do—the user comments on like the Letterboxd site are often mad that those choices were made by the screenwriter or filmmaker. The formula is a story we like to hear, even though we've heard it before. And especially because we've heard it before.

But life is not a movie. Mental illness does not honor formula. Substance use has no concept of an arc. It's all messy. So, let's talk about the mess. It is *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: A.J. Daulerio is a journalist and podcaster. He runs the newsletter and podcast *Small Bow*, which features a lot of stories of recovery, people sharing experiences, helping each other out. There are online recovery meetings through the website. Prior to that, A.J. rose to fame as the editor of the websites Deadspin and later Gawker.com. In that capacity, he wrote and ran a lot of stories of athletes and celebrities doing embarrassing things. He broke the story of Brett Favre's explicit text messaging. And on Gawker, he ran a portion of a sex tape featuring the pro

wrestler Hulk Hogan. That resulted in a massive lawsuit which Gawker and A.J. lost to the tune of \$140,000,000 in damages.

There were bankruptcy declarations, Gawker being sold off, A.J. being—I guess the word is pilloried—in public life. It was a massive, high-dollar, public humiliation. And all the while, A.J. Daulerio was a person who had struggled his whole life with depression, suicidality, bipolar disorder type two, and substance use disorder. He had tried to get sober a few times, tried to get his shit together, and he struggled.

I thought of the movie formula thing, because it's kind of easy to hammer someone like A.J. into a familiar narrative, to say, “Yeah, this big event happened either through a bizarrely over-the-top court system or A.J.'s own mistakes or hubris”—apply whatever tropes you like—“and then he gets sober and gets his mental health solved, and now he helps people, and everything is okay. Happily ever after.”

That's not how mental illness works though. That's not how addiction works. Or journalism! Or life! It's way squishier than that, way more overlapping. And it steps back and forward and sideways.

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In fact, the idea of the clean narrative arc—from trouble to everything being solved—is so ingrained in us from these stories that we keep consuming that it can make you feel worse when life and mental health don't go that way, when they're messy and they jump all over. As if it should all be clean and solved, as if you messed up somehow that this wasn't the case, that it wasn't clean and solved for you. You might feel bad about that. Please don't. That's reality. That's how life works. I really hope I can get that across to you so that you don't feel like you screwed up, because you didn't.

A.J. is sober, has been for a while. He's on meds that mostly work. But it's all still messy. In having this conversation, I thought maybe I should nail down specific dates when he quit this or started taking this med and what came before that and get that whole timeline nailed down. But then I thought maybe that's not so important. Maybe the specifics take away from seeing the whole thing. So, let's do the whole thing. And I thought that because mental health experiences are generally a mess. Yours, mine, A.J.'s. I'm here to tell you that's how it usually is. You're not alone. You're not doing it wrong. Let's listen to this conversation. I think you'll find something to relate to.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: A.J. Daulerio, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

A.J. Daulerio: Thanks for having me, John. Psyched to be here.

John Moe: I was listening to your conversation with a friend of mine, a friend of our show—Ana Marie Cox. Yeah. And I wanna get into a lot of what's gone into *The Small Bow* newsletter and your history, of course. Because we this is what we do on the show. But in that interview, you mentioned that people are still asking you about the Gawker lawsuit constantly, and you

don't love that. And I kind of went, *(sheepishly)* "Oh, I was gonna ask about that too." *(Chuckles.)* Without getting into the case itself, how is that with you today with your mental health? What are you still carrying from the trauma and the baggage of that incident?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah, it's interesting, 'Cause I— Every— Since it'll be I think 10 years in March, I believe. And the part that I recognize— *(Restarting.)* Why I don't like to talk about the case is because I was way too close to it. I don't have really any opinion about the First Amendment or what went down or how everything happened. You know, because this was happening to me in early recovery, I just felt like it was such an exposed nerve that—you know—I was kind of in a state of shock for the whole entire process. And it's the— I'm doing a memoir now, right? And I had to go and talk about that part of my life. And I had to go to one of the Gawker lawyers and basically be like, "So, what happened exactly?" *(Chuckles.)*

And just because of just why I said. That, you know, I don't have a good—I don't have a lot of emotional attachment to the outcome. I'll put it that way. The aftermath is really where I got fucked up. Because I felt like—that this was—I wasn't free of it for about two years after that. Right? And you know, there were some loose ends legally. They were still confiscating my phone and my computer about like—you know—nine months afterwards. So— And I didn't have a good sense of what the lawyers needed from me, and I certainly didn't have a good sense of just like what I could do for money and as a job. I was unemployable in a lot of ways, at least in terms of just like, you know, where I was before that in media.

So, I had to consider all those things. And plus, I was in early recovery and trying to figure out how to not let this case kinda get in the way of that. Right? Because in my early recovery I was so preoccupied with everything I just said about—you know—my job, my reputation, is Hulk Hogan gonna garnish my wages for perpetuity? And that stuff shouldn't have been in the way. Right? Because I needed— If I had just focused on doing all the things that people do when they get sober, a lot of that stuff would've gotten smaller and not as sharp and not have put me in the state that I was in. But I did it wrong. I thought I needed to get rid of this—be free of this trial and this trauma from the trial before I could really address my own mental health in a way that was productive. Right?

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John Moe: You thought you could get over it.

A.J. Daulerio: *(Sighs.)* I didn't really— Like, here's the thing, John. I didn't recognize how mad I was and how wounded I was by it. I didn't know exactly how I was supposed to feel. Right? And in hindsight, when I've talked to a lot of people who've gone through some level of large, public shame—right?—when you're fresh out of it, you have no perspective at all. Right? And I had both the public shame part and the new recovery part, where there is no perspective. And not fully understanding what I needed. Right? You know, who am I supposed to be talking to? Who am I supposed to be paying attention to?

But you know, I was just— And also, just to tie into the fact that my girlfriend, who I'd been dating for about a month and a half, was pregnant too. Right? In the middle of all this. So. And I was— I had just moved to Los Angeles to kind of escape all this stuff, but it was following me around. And I would be on, you know, her patio just chain smoking, talking to lawyers, talking to reporters, just agonizing over this stuff and feeling like there is no way out. And just to be free

from that spin—and I would probably put it at about two years—where I began to recognize, “Oh, man. I just kind of put so many things on hold.”

Like, I describe it as— You know, I was in Los Angeles. I felt like I wasn't allowed to go to the beach until this stuff was resolved. No Christmas for me. (*Laughs.*) No—like, until I am back in a way that I feel fully human and not ashamed and that this isn't the first thing that I want to talk about, only then can I start to kind of just really start to live my life in a way that is meaningful and important and be part of other people's lives.

John Moe: Was this your first time going through rehab and entering recovery?

A.J. Daulerio: I had been trying for probably the better part of a decade, where every couple years I would be like, “Okay, I have to change my behavior. I have to change. I have to—” And I would do the thing where—you know, only drink wine! I will only, you know, smoke pot. Like, I would kind of play just—you know—

John Moe: Negotiate it.

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. And just do like the bingo way of recovery. But you know. So, right before I went to the trial, I had just gotten out of like a 45/47-day treatment in Florida between October and December. And then I was in—fled in for the trial at the end of February. So, still kind of fresh out of that. But prior to that in the summer, I'd gone to New Jersey and tried to do it then. I lasted nine days. It wasn't sticking. But had a couple stops and starts for about 20 years, I would say.

John Moe: You talked about needing to kind of finish things and not having a Christmas until you get through this. Was there something that you had in mind that would signify “I have gotten through this”? Like, were you waiting for a specific event that, in your mind, would mark that?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah! I thought that I would— Once there was this wonderful *New York Times* magazine profile of me persevering through this and coming out the other side, and then—

John Moe: “He’s Off Drugs and High on Life”?

A.J. Daulerio: And here's the six-figure book deal, and the comeback, and the redemption arc has completely— I'm on the ascent. Right? That was when I thought that I could kind of get Christmas again. Sure. Yeah.

John Moe: External validation then.

A.J. Daulerio: External validation. 100%, yeah.

John Moe: Okay. You know, I want to build sort of a timeline here when it comes to mental health. But let's get a baseline. How are you doing today?

A.J. Daulerio: I always answer it in a question of out of ten. Right? So, today I would say I'm about an eight and a half. So, it's a really good day.

John Moe: That's outstanding.

A.J. Daulerio: It is. It's outstanding. Right? But because I've been medicated now for about four years— And I am in the—and you talk about this beautifully on your show—I'm in the bipolar two medication category. So, I'm on Lamictal, and I'm on Gabapentin, and then I have an emergency pill called Zyprexa, which is when I really wanna kill myself. And that just knocks me out. Right? So, that has been a good way for me to regulate. I mean, I can't go super-manic.

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It really helps with the depression in the sense that I can recognize this stuff happening. But more importantly, it's opened up “Oh, I know how to feel good now.” Right? I recognize when that's happening. Because I think for most of my life what I was missing was the ability to feel good, not knowing what that was like. And it wasn't until I started to take better care of myself and prioritize that my mental health is something I have to work on every single day? That was when like the joy was unlocked a little bit for me.

John Moe: Huh. Yeah. Dysthymia is sometimes the term for that kind of thing.

(A.J. confirms.)

So, that had been going on your whole life?

A.J. Daulerio: Yes. I remember— I mean, I remember being suicidal at 12 and, you know, asking my friend— I was just like, “You know, I think I want to kill myself,” not knowing the full extent of what that meant, just knowing that I didn't want to feel the way that I was feeling. Right? And then having the anxiety since I've been like 9; always being a terrible sleeper; always being kind of tormented by something; never feeling safe at home or those sort of feelings. And you know, as I got into my teenage years in high school, that's when drugs and alcohol started to come into play. But I wasn't— I don't think I was an addict by that point. But I did find a way to obviously feel better about myself. That was a way for me to feel better about myself.

But once I got to college, that was when the depression really kicked in. And I remember just feeling sunken to a point where I was like, “I don't even know who I'm supposed to call here. Right? I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know— I know that this feels like my life is over, right? And then I can't do anything.” This was in 1992? Right? So. And my— So, I'm like a child of the '80s I would say. A little bit. And my parents are very conservative, and they're very punitive, and they were kind of emotionally cut off. So, I wasn't really able to express how I felt around them. 'Cause I knew they wouldn't believe me, and I knew that there would be— They would only kind of add to my misery at that point and make me feel ashamed of just the— whatever I was feeling. So, I decided I would become an alcoholic at that point, because that would be a lot easier—basically—for them to tolerate.

So, I got myself real drunk.

John Moe: You chose alcoholism?!

A.J. Daulerio: Some kids choose to go to Europe to have like a gap year.

(John laughs.)

I chose to go to an outpatient clinic in Northeast Philadelphia for like six months in order to kind of recalibrate. Right? But you know, as I said this was because I was really just clinically depressed. But I didn't know how to express it.

John Moe: Did you know that was what it was? That it was a condition called clinical depression?

A.J. Daulerio: Nooo, not at that point. I just thought it was because I was a fucking loser! And because I couldn't get my shit together, and because I couldn't pass like—you know—basic College Literature 101 at LaSalle University. Right? Or that I didn't have friends and ambitions and dreams and a girlfriend. Like, you know, all of the—

John Moe: So, it was a character flaw.

(A.J. confirms.)

You were a fuck up.

A.J. Daulerio: Exactly! Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's the thing that my parents instilled in me was that if all of this other stuff is working for you, then you won't feel this way. But obviously over time, when I did begin to make enough money, have the career that I wanted, have many relationships with women who loved me, and still cratering in ways that the only way out would be to self-sabotage and kind of—you know—blow up my life, sometimes really spectacularly, that's when it kind of dawned on me. It's just like, “Okay, well maybe I'm not the one driving the bus here on this thing.” Right?

(They laugh.)

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with A.J. Daulerio after the break, including what it's like for your employer to suddenly owe \$140,000,000 to Hulk Hogan because of something you did. And you, personally, owing Hogan \$100,000.

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: We're back talking with A.J. Daulerio. He was talking about mental illness and booze and drugs.

When you would get drunk or get high, were you able to feel something then?

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Were you able to feel good then? Or was it just a numbing agent?

A.J. Daulerio: It was a numbing agent, for sure. I mean, you know, I once I started to kind of bring in the psychedelics and molly and ecstasy when I was just like, “Oh! You can feel really, really good.” But obviously—I mean, the next day it's all gone. *(Chuckling.)* Right? And you're kind of worse off than you were before. But I mean, more than anything, I describe my suicidal ideation/depression this way. I just I describe it as just like I don't want to die; I just want to kill myself all the fucking time. Right? *(Laughs.)* It's just like— You know, I don't feel like I am the person who is actually in charge. It feels like my brain is pushing me into a furnace when I'm in a really bad state.

John Moe: When you say you don't want to die you just want to kill yourself, do you mean that you want to punish yourself and feel the pain that goes into it?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeeeeeah. I mean, I don't want to have— Like, I still want to be in my children's lives. Right? I don't wanna make people sad because I'm gone. And because I've experienced joy in some way, I don't want to exit early. But I'm also in so much pain that I feel like it's an inevitability. Right?

I mean— And I try to kind of explain this to people all the time, which is just: what I am being treated for is—like, the chances of me killing myself are higher than others. Right? Most. Like, that's what I have. That's the disease that I have. I am suicidal. And I am trying to get a handle on that, so that is not the way that I die. And that's what I work through all the time. So, when I say, “I don't want to die, I just wanna kill myself sometimes,” that's how I call like the disease of suicidal ideation. I'm not going to say just what's going to trigger me, because I don't know what that is. I mean, I will admit this—and I haven't admitted this publicly yet.

But about last summer, I was having a really great day. I felt all the love of my household. I loved what I was doing for a job. I felt like I was contributing in all the service ways that I was doing for 12 Steps and being a real kind of—a benefit to people's lives. And I stood in the kitchen with a knife to my heart basically being like, “Well. This is a good way to go, right now. On the upswing”—still feeling that was the pole that I was at. And I'm just like, “Why am I still feeling this way? Things should not be this tragic all of the time.” And then, you know, I go back to my therapist, and I go back to my psychiatrist, and I'm like, “Help.” *(Chuckling.)* Right? You know? And that's— But I mean, this is— I think most people who work through this, this is what you go through. This is constantly changing. Right? And that's just what I've learned.

John Moe: What happened right after you were holding that knife?

A.J. Daulerio: I called my friend. I called a couple people. I called a couple people who go through similar sort of situations and my one friend who has written a book about this stuff, his name's Clancy Martin.

John Moe: I know Clancy.

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. I called Clancy, and I'm just like, “Look, this is the situation.”

And he's just like, "Okay. I know this is gonna sound silly but go take a walk. Your problem is impatience right now, more than anything else. You just have to be patient and let this part of your brain kind of just—you know—run its course. But in the meantime, take a walk."

And if my wife told me to take a walk, I would basically be just like, "Alright, well you're not helping the situation." But because Clancy's an authority on this, I listen to him. Right? And that's kind of the benefit of having people who have been through this in some capacity, that I trust them. Right?

John Moe: In your column on *Slate*, in your bio, you added "hasn't had a drink in eight years or a drug in seven years, has been medicated on antidepressants and antipsychotics for five years." I wanna get to what happened at those year markers. But why did you put that on your *Slate* bio?

A.J. Daulerio: Because I think it's important for people to be open about their medication. 'Cause I always want to know what works for people. Right? And I want to let other people know about my own experience on this stuff. Right? I mean, you know, before I was on Lamictal, I was on Abilify. And Abilify made things not great for me. Right? I mean, Abilify, I would wake up in the morning, and I would just get paranoid about—I went to the emergency room one time, because I thought I had a fish oil capsule stuck in my throat. And I'm at the emergency room for 16 hours basically, while—

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(*Chuckling.*) You know, because I'm low on the priority list, obviously. And then finally—

John Moe: (*Chuckling.*) Been triaged at that point.

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. And then finally, you know, I'm there; and the guy is snaking a light up my nose to basically look down my throat to convince me that it's not there. But in my head, I am like, "No, it's there." Right? (*Laughs.*)

So, it was just a lot of things like this. I thought I got carbon monoxide poisoning. It was just this sort of paranoia that I was infected with Abilify. So, I think it's good to share that information with people who are looking to just like, you know, get on these types of medication. I've had success with Lamictal at, you know, the 250-300, which is a low dose. But—And I double down on my Gabapentin. Sometimes I go like 1,000mg per day to just like kind of modulate a little bit. I think it's important to talk about the meds that I'm on in the hopes that other people can be transparent about that as well. Right?

John Moe: Well, and to see that it's a fluid thing.

(*A.J. agrees.*)

It's not "then I found the pill, and then I was fine forever." And it's just not like that.

A.J. Daulerio: It's not like that. But it's also just—you know, I got— It's also I don't want people to think that once I stopped drinking or stopped using drugs that that was my problem.

Right? I mean, it's usually— I think that once you kind of clear that stuff out of the way, then you can kind of have the full scope of just what's actually wrong and what needs to be fixed. But you have to make that effort though to do that.

John Moe: It's so interesting too that— You know, there's kind of this narrative—especially with people in the public eye—that you were depressed; you had all these things going on; you were using; you were self-medicating; and then you stopped; and then now you're good. And what you're describing is “I've been fucked up for a very long time. Drinking and drugs were part of that medication effort. And now they're not. And now other things are. And we're on the same bus that we've been on the whole time.” (*Chuckles.*)

A.J. Daulerio: Exactly. It's funny how— I don't know like the full scope of your story, but I think that every single person who experiences depression and anxiety, there is always a moment where things feel strange. Right? There's this defining moment where it's just: “Okay, I am experiencing things differently. My emotions are different. I have a mood disorder in some way.” But I also can't predict when it happens too. Right? And I think that's the difference where, you know, I— Like I said, I mean I can have everything going well in my life and still just feel like I'm not supposed to be here anymore. (*Chuckling.*) Right?

And that's the difference between— I think that most people don't have that distinction fully. People don't fully understand that that's the struggle. That's the disease of this. Right? That's the thing that needs to be taken care of every single day.

John Moe: So, what's the work then? What's the work that you have to put in, besides trying meds and kind of calibrating what they do? Like, what's the work that you put in?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. Well, obviously don't drink; don't use. But I meditate. I do that every day. I started doing Brazilian jujitsu, which kind of just like helps me get out of my head for that period of time where I don't have to think of anything. Although, I do get pretty depressed because I'm terrible at it. But at the same time, not the same level of depression. But I also— Like I said, I mean I have three guys I can call. And look. I mean, I put Anna on that list too, where it's just like people who can understand that these are feelings that sometimes will scare people away. But I have people who will not be scared by that—right?—and just help me get through it.

John Moe: You talk about this longstanding dysthymia, this pain, this suicidality. And I think back on when I first started reading your stuff on Deadspin and on Gawker. And it wasn't sad necessarily, but there was a lot of stories about people in sad situations and scandal and people just making shitty life decisions. Were you naturally drawn to those stories because of what was happening inside your mind?

A.J. Daulerio: (*Stammering.*) I don't— I mean, it's tough to kind of make that parallel. 'Cause I mean— And I understand why people do it. Right? But I was working for a company and a guy where that was part of the job.

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I think I was pretty good at it, because I had that nihilistic streak that (*chuckling*) makes you a pretty good gossip. Right? But yeah. Look, I understood when people's jobs or marriages were

gonna fall apart based off of you know a post that I did. Like, that would make me feel bad. But I would be able to kind of compartmentalize that and say just like, “Well! I mean, they shouldn't have made whatever dumb mistake that they made.” Right?

But yeah it's like— You know, now that's been beaten out of me, I would say. (*Chuckles.*) Because I am so concerned. I mean, I'm the first guy—like, I'm the first responder team when someone gets canceled or publicly shamed. Like, I just kind of am there with that the blanket to put out the flames as quickly as possible. Because I don't want people to feel like that anymore. You know, when I started doing the podcast—our own podcast, *The Small Bow*—I said I wanted to talk to people like I wish people talked to me when I was going through the Hogan thing; that people saw me as someone who was suffering in some ways and gave me some space to heal. Right? But I always found that, especially in the early going, it was like people wanted to talk about the karmic payback that was happening. Right?

Because, you know, I was a guy that had caused so much pain working at Gawker and had done so many fucked up things in my own life that, well, no grace for him. Right? (*Chuckles.*) At least, that's how I felt. I mean, that may have not been people's intention. But I mean, that was kind of how I felt. So, I try to be considerate of other people's feelings when they're discussing really tough moments. Right?

I mean, you wouldn't have someone on and then afterwards basically be like, “Well! They kind of deserved it.” (*Laughs.*) You know? It would be a weird show. It would be— (*Chuckling.*)

John Moe: Yeah, I hope not. Yeah. It would be—yeah, just a terrible show. Well, when you were getting those characterizations and being exposed to this narrative of karma and being painted as kind of a monster, was that at odds with how you felt about yourself? Or was that consistent with how you felt about yourself?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. I mean I was in full self-hate mode by that point. Of course. But I mean—

John Moe: Yeah. You felt like the monster they were making him out to be.

A.J. Daulerio: Well, I thought that was what— I thought that was an asset. Because I mean, that was kind of the job that I was in. Right? You had to be monstrous in my mind. And look. I mean, I don't think you necessarily have to work for Gawker to be kind of merciless. I mean, I think all media kind of has to take on that in a lot of ways. I mean—you know, anybody that's doing a story for the *New York Times* about someone—I mean, people are gonna get upset. Right? I mean, the truth upsets people. That's how it goes. But I mean, for me, I am always one to— I had to learn the difference between “there's things that I deserved” and “deserved was not entitlement.” Right? I think I couldn't tell the difference between those two. And I think entitlement really goes back to like the self-hatred part, where it's just like, “Well, I can't kind of experience any of these good things, because I'm a bad person.” Right? You know.

It's just like that difference between guilt and shame, where it's basically just like “I caused the problem,” where shame is “I am the problem.” Similar sort of thing between deserved and entitled, as far as I'm concerned. Where I couldn't say— Deserved is more self-love. Right? And I had no access to that whatsoever. It was either just “I'm basically in charge and causing all this pain for people by posting the stories that I'm posting, and I'm good at that,” or “I'm not doing

that, and I'm feeling like shit about myself. And there's no reward whatsoever.” Right? I never saw any way out.

John Moe: Was there a moment when you stopped using—and you haven't been using or drinking for many years—was there a bottoming out? Or was it just “this sucks; I gotta stop doing it”?

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: We will get the answer to that in just a moment.

Promo:

Music: Playful piano.

J. Keith van Straaten: Say, what's the trivia show where dreams come true?

Helen Hong: It's gotta be *Go Fact Yourself!*

(Applause from the audience.)

Speaker: Legend in the house!

J. Keith: We quiz celebrity contestants about topics they love!

Helen: Then bring out surprise experts!

J. Keith: To delight and amaze.

(Scene change.)

And then finally, tell us why you know and love the lyrics to the song “Knockin’ Boots” by Candyman.

[00:35:00]

Helen: Joining us tonight is a rapper and producer. It's Candyman!

(Screams and applause.)

J. Keith: This is among the greatest moments of my life.

(Laughter and applause.)

Candyman: This is one of mine too. I'm loving it.

Helen: That's *Go Fact Yourself*.

J. Keith: Twice a month, every month—

Helen: Here on Maximum Fun!

(Music ends.)

Promo:

Music: Bright, playful music.

Stacey Molski: Since 2017, after every MaxFun Drive we've held a sale for MaxFun members where all of the proceeds go to a nonprofit. In December, we donated \$43,000 to Transgender Law Center. \$43,000! Thank you to all the MaxFun members who made this possible. Transgender Law Center champions the right of all transgender and gender nonconforming people to live freely, safely, and authentically: a mission that everyone at MaxFun supports. If you'd like to learn more or make an additional donation, go to TransgenderLawCenter.org. And for anyone who needs to hear this:

You belong here. You deserve to be able to be yourself. And we love you.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: I'm talking with A.J. Daulerio. Before the break, I asked him if there was a bottoming out moment for his booze and drug habit—hitting rock bottom like you always hear about.

A.J. Daulerio: I mean, I was kind of— You've probably heard this, 'cause you've been doing this type of work for so long. But I mean, the trapdoor bottom. Right? You know, where you think it's you think it's rehab, but it's not. Oh, you think it's like the trial, and you're losing \$115,000,000 from a weird wrestler. And it's not. And the real bottoming out for me is when *Esquire* did a profile of me like soon after the trial was over. Because—

John Moe: Yeah, I read that one.

A.J. Daulerio: And the reason why I call that a bottom, like emotionally, I thought— Remember what we were talking about at the beginning where it's just like “Oh, once there's this

redemption arc that happens—publicly—where people see that I'm a human and I'm persevering and I'm getting through that.” That was my expectation for that story, and it was the opposite of it. Right? It kind of— You know, at that point when I was doing that story, I was living in LA; my girlfriend was pregnant; I had a job. Like, I was actually kind of getting through this. But their version left me in Florida. In outpatient recovery. Alone and never going to be able to work again. Right? I mean, there was— They didn't give me that at all. Right? A

And it was strange to me. 'Cause that goes back to the part where just like, “Oh, well I guess I don't actually deserve this. People aren't going to see me this way. And this is the punishment,” where I'm basically in purgatory in west Palm Beach at a \$1,300 a month condo. I was probably about six months sober at that point, but it didn't feel that way. It didn't make me want to drink or use, but I definitely didn't have any way that— I didn't have the tools basically, in my life right now, where that story didn't impact me and me thinking that my life was over.

John Moe: That story mentioned an incident from your childhood of possible molestation.

(A.J. confirms.)

And kind of a showdown with your father, who I understand has recently passed. Did—*(sighs)* did that story being brought up again in a public way create a hard time for you? Or did it help you face it?

A.J. Daulerio: It killed me. No, it killed me. Yeah. Yeah, because it was— You know, I'm sharing that at a period of time where I'm like “I don't know if this happened.” Right? This is like in this weird, hazy, recovered memory stage. Which I mean, is something that people go through. And when people go through rehab, you have a lot of those things happening. Right? You know, which are ghosts, and which are actual things that happened? And I was going through the process of trying to figure that out. Putting together timelines, trying to figure out just “is this when this happened?” So, when I'm sharing that with the writer, I'm not sharing it as kind of this definitive truth. I'm sharing it as just like, “Oh, this is something that I'm struggling with, and I don't know if this happened or not. But my parents are the only people that have like the keys to that sort of information.”

And that's really what caused the fight between my father and I. Right? And— But I mean, yeah. I mean, it caused me some pain, because it was— You know, the writer chose to try to fact check it and was asking me just like, “Well, if this happened to you why, wouldn't you wanna press charges against this person?”

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Like, you know, “If you're basically a guy that is trying to kind of help people in the work that you do—right?—where you're a truth teller? Well, what about all these other potential victims that you—” *(Stammering.)* And just I'm not ready to have that conversation. I don't know the answer to this. Right? But the fact that they led with it? It's like what do I do then? Then it's out there, and then it's just embarrassing. 'Cause I don't like to claim victimhood over that. Look, I know something fucked up happened in my childhood. You know? I can feel it on my body someplace. But you know, I don't have a date and time or like a person's face that's attached to it. I think it was this guy, but they're long dead. And then, you know—so. But so, yeah, to answer your question: that was painful.

John Moe: Let's talk about something that's a little more healing than painful for—

A.J. Daulerio: No, let's just dig deeper, man.

(John laughs.)

Let's just fucking take a pickaxe to all my wounds, John! Go after it. Yeah.

John Moe: Well, I mean what I really love about this story honestly is like there is pain, and there's efforts to heal. And you know, it doesn't fit the three-act formula of a lifetime movie. You know, where there's—like, it starts out bad, and then cataclysmic events, and then you're fine.

(A.J. confirms.)

You know, it's an ongoing struggle, like so many ongoing struggles we have in life. Part of that journey towards healing I think was starting *The Small Bow* newsletter. For people who aren't familiar with it, can you tell us about what *Small Bow* is and also where the name comes from?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. *(Chuckling.)* I mean, the name is gonna be a little convoluted. I'll tell you in bits. But so, *The Small Bow* I started in 2018, and I received a grant from like this cryptocurrency media company that no longer exists. And the premise for the site initially was that I was going to be a newsroom covering the opioid crisis. Right? You know, halfway sort of did that. The grant ran out of money. But I was enjoying the work, and I decided to switch to like a newsletter format where I would do some more personal essays. Right? Which was a challenge for me. I was afraid to do that. I was afraid that people—In my mind, everybody who was going to be Googling me at night and just like go “what happened to the Gawker loser?” would see me writing about this as a lame attempt to basically just you know redeem myself and get my job back.

See how my head works? I mean, you're getting insight into this. But so, over time—you know—I started to write these essays, and I would get emails from people who didn't know anything about the Gawker trial, who were just looking for things in the same way that I was—right?—and were finding that connection through my work and through my recovery and through my failures at recovery and—you know—finding that it helped them. So, I continued to do it that way. But *The Small Bow*—So, let me also say that just the tagline is “expanding the definition of recovery,” because I try to bring in—It's not just drugs. It's not just alcohol. It is mental health. It is kind of my bipolar two. It is my relationship with my parents. It is like all of these other sort of 12 Step programs that I've tried and attempted and failed at. So. And I wanna have other people's experiences kind of just like fit in there as well.

But *The Small Bow* name, when I was initially trying to write a recovery memoir—which was pretty soon after the trial. I had an agent, and they were like, “You know, you should get this out quickly, because even though you're not getting good press, your visibility is very high, and that will help you sell this.”

So, I was trying to look at other popular recovery memoirs. And there's one that was called *The Lost Weekend*, which was written by Charles Jackson. It was back in the 1930s, I believe. I think it

won the Academy Award for Best Picture. And it won the Academy Award for Best Picture. It was his first book that he wrote. He was sober, and then after all the success, he became not sober, because he became obsessed with trying to write a follow up and then completely relapsed. There was a book written about that man's life—Charles Jackson's life—in the review that I was reading on the *New York Times*. The author, who's this woman named Donna Rifkind; and she's written a whole bunch of book reviews—she had this phrase to describe this writer and said that “he had too great a wound, and too small a bow.”

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For whatever reason, that hit me straight in the chest, filled me up, and I was like “I get exactly what that means.” Right? Without fully grasping what it could possibly mean. But how I interpreted it at the time was that I'm ill-equipped to fight this thing, but I'm gonna try anyway. And that was kind of the small bow that you're fighting against this enormous task of basically a thing that's smothering you and trying to kill you. (*Laughs.*) Right?

John Moe: Well, isn't it interesting then that you find this salve—you know, this thing that that helps so much—through writing. You know, that the written word is— I don't wanna say your redemption, but a real mark of healing, which is the same thing that you're trying to do with the newsletter. Do you see yourself as being on a mission right now with the kind of stuff that you're writing and the kind of stuff that you're presenting from other writing? Like, is it cause-driven?

A.J. Daulerio: Hm. I don't if it's cause. My recovery and *The Small Bow* are two separate things. Right? Where it's just— You know, my recovery comes first. *The Small Bow* is my job at this point, and I'm very transparent about that. I mean, I'm trying to make a living doing *The Small Bow*, just as you're trying to make a living doing your podcast. But it requires me to do a lot of this work, and I'm in constant communication with other people who read the site as— We're collectively healing is how I try to present it, which I think is probably similar to the way you approach this. I mean, it's just— These conversations help you, help the person you're talking to, and hopefully help other people.

I was having this conversation today, 'cause we're doing another book, which is we're doing our version of *The Big Book*. And it's *The Small Bow*, and we have a lot of these essays that are written by other people. And we were having the discussion about, you know, should this be more lurid, or should this be something that is more of like a how-to? And I said it's probably more lurid in the sense that the thing that I've had people respond to the most— When people see their own secrets on the page, that's really what hooks them in. Right? You know? And that's the stuff that I really try to connect to. So, I don't know if that's a cause, but I recognize that that was kind of absent in my life. And that if I can kind of provide that for other people, great.

John Moe: Yeah. I think it's very consistent with what we're trying to do on this show. Like, I'm—you know, I'm really— (*Sighs.*) I'm honored and I'm excited that you shared the story about the knife in the kitchen. Not because it's— You know, maybe that is lurid. But that's the kind of thing that somebody is gonna hear this and say, “Oh my god, I had that moment too.”

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. And that's what— I mean, and that's— And I know you, from the episodes that I've listened to—I mean, I think you're very thoughtful about your approach in this. And you are considerate of other people, like your listeners and the person that you're talking to. And I think that that's really required to kind of get— I don't like to use the word

stigma, but I think if you think about it in the way— And I like the way that you approach it where you're basically just like “This is a disease. This isn't a character flaw. This isn't just like something that is like— This isn't morality here. This is people struggling in a way, and here's the science behind that, and here's my own personal experience. Here's the experience with people that I love, and here's people that— Clearly, I have an archive that proves otherwise.” And I think it's very important to talk about that stuff, and that's why I was as honest with you about that.

John Moe: I know that in *The Small Bow*, there are daily meetings that take place. What's behind that, and what's kind of the inspiration for how those are run?

A.J. Daulerio: Sure. Initially, it was a pandemic meeting that we did on Zoom. 'Cause I mean— And I didn't want to do a 12 Step meeting, 'cause—you know, like I said, I would say probably half of our readership may in some sort of AA or 12 Step. And the rest of the people are—I like to call, you know, feeling strange and lonely. And I wanted a meeting place where those people could feel accepted as well. So, yeah. We do do them at six days a week, right now. I run the Tuesday meeting, and we switch over secretaries every three months. They've been running for almost six years now.

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You know. I'm very impressed with how much they've grown and how people are responding to them. Sometimes we get 10 people, but at most there's like 40 people in some of the meetings too. Everybody can share. It's a crosstalk meeting too, which means that everybody can like respond to other people's shares, which also kind of makes it unique. And we do have outside issues. So, if people are frustrated by the world, they can talk about that as well. And I just think it's a great space for people to kind of come, convalesce, find some companionship, get better in ways that they don't have to kind of just become alcoholics to join in.

John Moe: Right. I know that this is your job to run this site and to host those meetings. Are those meetings part of your recovery also?

A.J. Daulerio: Yeah. I started to not go to the meetings, because I thought, “Oh, this is like marketing for me.” Right? I'm performing too much. I'm paying too much attention to people paying attention to me. And then—you know, this year in particular where my life got a little bit more busy, I was like, “Okay. I know the benefits that I can get from these meetings, and I'm gonna apply myself to it.” That's when I stepped up and took the secretary gig for the Tuesday meeting. So, I've found a way for them to work for me whereas before I was a little hesitant to join in.

John Moe: In the newsletter in a recent article that you posted for the new year, you talked about a poem that you read each year. Can you tell us a little bit about that poem?

A.J. Daulerio: Sure. It's called “The Davenport Lunar Eclipse”. It's by this author named JimHarrison. But I publish it every year on New Year's, 'cause there's a few stanzas at the bottom which are essentially— And he's exactly the age I am now. I think he's 51 when he's writing it. But he's basically having acceptance with all his flaws. And he is okay with the age he is; he's okay with basically how other people kind of see him and accept him. And he's living his life, and that's it. And I think that's the part that always grabs me every single time is every single year

I read this, I see something different, and I see something that is absolutely closer to where I'm at. Every single year I read it, I get closer and closer to kind of feeling that connection to all of my surroundings.

John Moe: I don't know if you have the poem in front of you right now, but is there any part of it you'd like to read out loud?

A.J. Daulerio: I mean, you could have told me beforehand, John! I mean, I would've pulled it up. But I mean— Here we go! Perfect. “I feel pleasantly old and stupid deciding not to worry about who I am but how I spend my days, until I tear in the weak places like a thin, worn sheet. Back in my room, I can't hear the river passing like time or the moon emerging from the shadow of Earth, but I can see the water that never repeats itself. It's very difficult to look at the world and into your heart at the same time. In between, a life has passed.”

John Moe: Ah, that was beautiful.

A.J. Daulerio: Good! I'm glad. Yeah.

(John chuckles.)

It would be weird if you were just like, “Eh, you know. It's kind of— It's not the greatest. Eh, it's fine. Yeah.”

John Moe: *(Chuckles.)* Doesn't— In that Ethan Hawke show that just came out, doesn't he talk a lot about Jim Harrison on the show?

A.J. Daulerio: Probably. It looks like it. He kind of dresses like him. Exactly. Yeah. *(Laughs.)* I think so.

John Moe: Yeah, yeah. Well, A.J. Daulerio, thank you so much for your time, and I'm glad that you're continuing to search for and find things that help.

A.J. Daulerio: Thank you, John. This was awesome.

Music: “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

John Moe: A.J. Daulerio's *Small Bow* podcast and newsletter can be found at [SmallBow.com](https://smallbow.com).

Before we go, last week I talked a little about the weight of living in Minnesota right now. That's where I live. For me, even with all my privileges, it weighed a ton. I can't imagine— I actually cannot imagine. I am unable to imagine what it's like being Somali or another immigrant or even a person of color around here. Obviously, last week, something horrible happened. And Renee Nicole Good was killed by ICE agents in Minneapolis, a couple of miles from me. And it happened on the same day that I recorded this episode with A.J. Daulerio. With *The Small Bow*, A.J. is making his version of what I and Raghu and Kevin and MaxFun are trying to do here. We know we're outnumbered. But we're trying to provide some hope.

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There are lots of reasons to lose hope—more reasons every day, and shit is awful in Minnesota right now. They're busting into high schools. They're dragging people outta their cars. They're killing people in cars. Later that day after I taped that interview with A.J., it was hard to function. So, for a while I petted the dogs; I did a jigsaw puzzle; I took a nap with said dogs; I slept; I got up; I had coffee; I solved the wordle in two. And then I got back to work on the show again. Things felt worse because of what has happened and what's been happening and from not knowing how long things will be like this. But god dammit, I gotta work.

One, because fuck him. And two, because it's all I can do in this situation. And three, because I can at least do something. My job here is to try to help you feel less alone, get you some help, get you some hope, get you to understand things as best I can, and let you know that hell yes, it's hard. And we'll keep pushing. You and me? We're doing some important work.

Be sure to hit subscribe to this podcast. That helps us a lot. Give us five stars, write rave reviews, and maybe even send a link around to a friend.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States and Canada by calling or texting 988. It's free. It's available 24/7. I know I mention it every week. Really, I just wanna burn the numbers 988 into your head. Because if you run into a time where your head is stormy, maybe you can retain those three numbers: 988.

We're on BlueSky at [@DepreshMode](#). Our Instagram is [@DepreshPod](#). Our newsletter is on Substack. Search up *Depresh Mode* or John Moe; you'll find it. I'm on BlueSky and Instagram at [@JohnMoe](#). And look, I have said it before, but it's a reality. The only way we can make this show is if people support it. Hopefully, you get something out of it that is worth \$5 a month to you or \$10 or whatever it is that makes it work for you. If you have already given, thank you. You are making this show happen, and you're helping hopefully yourself but definitely other people in the world. Just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](#). It's really easy. Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. There is probably art near you—a gallery, a museum, the wall of a cafe. Please go look at it. Stop in front of a piece, and take it in. Be a human existing at the same time and in the same moment as that art. Experience that feeling. Because that feeling is real bitchin'.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”. *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

Music:

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

Adam Leibert Johnson: Hi, this is Adam Liebert Johnson from Long Beach California, and your struggle is valid.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

Speaker 1: Maximum Fun.

Speaker 2: A worker-owned network.

Speaker 3: Of artist owned shows.

Speaker 4: Supported—

Speaker 5: —directly—

Speaker 6: —by you!