

Speaker 1: Welcome to Office Hours, presented by the University of Pennsylvania's Office of University Communications. Through this series, we hope to bring you candid discussions with some of campus' great minds. Dialogue that is a little more unbuttoned than you might find in a lecture hall, or reminiscent of the casual chats you might remember with your favorite professor from college. That could mean discussing their work, exploring their hobbies; maybe they moonlight as a rapper or a stand-up comic, or finding out what corners of campus host the best food finds.

Speaker 1: Today, we step into the office hours of Dwayne Booth, a cartoonist who goes by the more popular name of "Mr. Fish." Mr. Fish is a lecturer at the Annenberg School of Communication, whose work has been featured in the Los Angeles Times, the Village Voice, Vanity Fair, Mother Jones, The Advocate, Slate.com, and other popular publications. In addition to many, that, speaking to his ethos, are not popular: Booth has found an audience as an alternative cartoonist whose work can sometimes feel just a smidge unsettling, and often needs about as much time to adjust as a Thanksgiving dinner. Examples of his work can be found at clowncrack.com. For now, we start with the obvious: Where did that "fish" nickname come from?

Speaker 1: What is Mr. Fish? What is his backstory behind that?

Dwayne Booth: About the actual name of Mr. Fish?

Speaker 1: Yeah. Do you prefer Mr. Fish? Or is it just Dwayne?

Dwayne Booth: You can just call me "Fish", it's fine, yeah. No, Dwayne sounds like there's some authoritarian figure asking for my license or something or demanding to see my papers. Yeah, I'm just used to hearing Fish, which came from when I had dropped out of college and I was really interested in just being a writer, playwright. I did some stand-up. I never wanted to do anything with art. I even dropped out art school. I'm very quick with being able to render things, always have been. So, while I was writing longer pieces, I would think of jokes, and the short-hand for getting the joke down was actually drawing a doodle of it, rather than trying to figure out how it was going to be worded and the text that I was writing.

Dwayne Booth: So, being ... Dropped out of school and living in the back of my parent's house, and not having a job. Every parent's dream. I figured that maybe I should try to actually bring in a little bit of income. So I had this stack of unsigned drawings, and I was also simultaneously looking at some magazines, like Mother Jones and the Nation magazine, and I hated the cartoons that they had in there. So I said, "Maybe I should try to be a political cartoonist," and my real name is Dwayne Booth, and the last name is "Booth". At the time, there was probably the most famous cartoonist for the New Yorker, whose name was George Booth. He was still working, and I couldn't be "Booth". You know, that's used by somebody very

famous, and I was not going to be "Dwayne", because that's very Cher, Madonna. You know, first name thing.

Speaker 1: That's not such a bad thing.

Dwayne Booth: Now it turns out that it would be awesome. But then I was like, "I'm just not going to do that." So I didn't do anything for a long time, and my mother had gotten my step-father a bird for Father's Day. He was asking for names, and I, of course thought the best name for a pet bird would be "Mr. Fish." So I wrote "Mr. Fish" on a piece of paper and put an arrow on it, and stuck it up next to the cage in the other part of the house for when my mother would wake up and hopefully see it, and say, "That's the perfect name for a pet!"

Dwayne Booth: I went to sleep. I used to sleep during the day, and then I would be up all night. I got up way late in the afternoon around dinner time to go back to my workstation to get work done, and she had rejected the name, so there was Mr. Fish on the wall with the arrow pointing down at this unsigned stack of cartoons. You know, when you're 19, I was like "Mr. Insufferable, know-it-all", and everything is really interesting. "Oh look, this arrow is pointing down at this unsigned stack. I will be Mr. Fish." So I just wrote Mr. Fish on the cartoons and sent them out, and immediately got published.

Dwayne Booth: The thing that was really funny was that one of the publications that published my stuff, a magazine called Anarchy Magazine, the editor wrote back to me. This is before emails and everything, so just a hand-written note. He wrote back, and he pretended to have been a fan of Mr. Fish for the last 30 years. "I've been following your work for 30 years!"

Speaker 1: And how did you respond to that?

Dwayne Booth: I said, "I'm glad that you've loved my work for the last 30 years, here's more." You know? Because already, in his mind, whatever he was thinking, I was already established. So I sent more and it was like locked in. Then I couldn't get out of it. It's really one of those names that just doesn't have any real meaning, expect that it was just a happy accident that functioned for me somehow.

Speaker 1: Have you ever based a cartoon off the name?

Dwayne Booth: No. No. I've really liked the ... I've liked the anonymity that it gave me, particularly with the stuff that I draw, because my stuff has always been really inflammatory, and inviting of ... First, criticism, and then as I've moved into my career, I've gotten death threats. So, it was just nice to have a way for people aren't going to find me through my high school yearbook or anything, but of course, now it's easy. Anybody can find me.

Speaker 1: Has there been a lot of death threats?

Dwayne Booth: Depends what administration we're talking about. Yeah, so for the George W. Administration, there were a ton, and there were a bunch at the beginning of the Obama Administration from people who were angry that I was criticizing Obama. It's really my job to criticize power, you know, who is sitting in that chair? Actually, I did cartoons where I was warring against the danger of giving an authority figure who was more well-spoken than the previous president, and seemed much more intelligent than his predecessor, yet his policies were still ruthless. So you still have to criticize those people.

Dwayne Booth: Those are those people who are really angry, and they-

Speaker 1: Do you get stressed or excited thinking about new election cycles?

Dwayne Booth: I get stressed, and I get a little bit sad.

Speaker 1: Sad?

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, sad because people have ... They buy into it, constantly. Just because they're in pain, and I understand it. It's not like ... Obviously, with the mid-term elections. I find both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party just disgusting, but I understand with how the culture is shifting in such a way that we need some relief from a power structure that is now fine with communicating soft or no criticism of white supremacy, of racism, of ... You know, plugging in to the paranoid violence culture of the Second Amendment, you know, using that sort of ...

Dwayne Booth: That, to me is just like, "Okay, that's different with the Democratic Party, because they're a little more interested in the social issues in a different way." They're going to make a lot of people feel less victimized, particularly more minorities in this country. I totally understand that, and I do find myself saying, "Yes, I hope, given those two options, that the Democratic Party can gain some traction here." But what saddens me is the relationship that ... I would say the majority of this country has with democracy is voting and voting alone, and you can't function ... A democracy does not function if the only time you're going to exert your voice is during election cycles.

Dwayne Booth: You have to do a ton of crap in-between the election cycles, so again, it's just ... I can see where it can be useful in moving the ball a little bit in one direction, but the point is, it's just like, "Yes, now take the ball," and people have got to organize, and people have to be got to used to exerting a communal outrage. I mean, there're examples through history where that has demonstrated itself as the most effective way to save societies.

Speaker 1: Are there any subjects that you don't touch?

Dwayne Booth: No, I'll touch every subject, but the question about how to touch it and what my expectations are once I touch it. For example ... Because that question makes

me think of what happened with ... First, with the Danish cartoon controversy from 2005, 2006. The drawing of the prophet Muhammad, 12 versions, I think, were published. And then you think of Charlie Hebdo.

Dwayne Booth: I am of the mind where, "Okay, I support free speech." I would never, ever tell those cartoonists they shouldn't be doing what they are doing. But I wouldn't do it, because if you look at the population of the Muslim population in France, it's arguable that they're already on the ground, being kicked. It's a segment of the population that is vilified, or at least deemed with the potential of being radicalized and dangerous. So there's not a lot of respect just for that community over there. So it's very hard for me to get excited about cartoonists that are doing something that is upsetting to that community, because they're already upset just by how the mainstream politics and just the mainstream culture already treats them. So, just as a strategy, I would say, that it's not advancing any conversation, except one that says, "Yes. We should have free speech."

Dwayne Booth: But I think that there needs to be a larger conversation about: How do you deal with a minority population that is being abused by the dominant culture in that situation?

Speaker 1: Do a lot of your students seem in sync with these ideas and thoughts? Or do they offer some sort of pushback during classes?

Dwayne Booth: They will offer some ... Let me answer it this way ... There's so many ways to answer that question. I'm going to try to answer ... I'm going to go like this. You can't see me, but I'm making an arc with my hand. Let me just say that when it comes to certain social movements, a lot of my stuff is about social movements and the responsibility we have to recognize what those social movements are, and how we can either sustain them or alter them to fit the here and now to be effective. I find that with each passing semester, there is less and less knowledge of historical figures and historical events that you can build off by simply mentioning them.

Dwayne Booth: So, a lot of the conversation involves me getting very excited about making connection about something that's happening now to something that happened even five years ago, and fewer and fewer people are knowing what that is. Then it's a matter of sort of saying, "This is what this is, and then I've got to build it up to the present." That ... The problem with that is ... And I'm going to sound old, but I do blame technology for that lack of pre-knowledge from students who come into the classroom, because I find more and more ... So long as you're able to type into a Google search engine what you're curious about, there's no reason for you to research.

Dwayne Booth: Sure, you can have surveys. Every research that you're going to engage in, because it's in your major or something, but when it comes to history, like American history, political history. Unless that's your focus, there's not really

any reason for you to: A. Have a really burning curiosity to really look for it, because when you go looking for it ... As you know, anything you get curious about, you're going to be learning about how it connects to many different things, so you're committed to actually trying to build a knowledge base. When you're doing that, you're deliberating on certain things, and you're making these connections so that you think you have a sound opinion about something.

Dwayne Booth: People aren't going to do that so much anymore, because they don't have to. If I want a conversation with you, and I mention the Paris Commune. Was that when Napoleon was still in power? I think it was right after he ... Well, let's see. There. Right?

Speaker 1: Having access to everything, you're an expert in nothing.

Dwayne Booth: Right! Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, and you don't have ... Again, I did the arc thing and I could talk about that forever. But getting back to the whole idea of the pushback from the students when they agree or disagree. There're certain things that you bring up that they don't know that ... They haven't thought sufficiently enough about it to really have a solid opinion about it. That said, they will have a reaction to things. For example, sometimes if I've shown something that deliberately promotes a really ugly stereotype in class, the reaction will be just like, "Well, that should never be allowed to be seen." Then I can show some things that are about a version of a stereotype. For example, in the 1800s when the idea of women having equal rights or being equal to men, it was disgusting to mainstream society. There were political battles to prevent women from having that much power. You do the same thing with blacks, you do the same thing with the gay movement.

Dwayne Booth: At one time, even if it wasn't rendered as a stereotype, an ugly stereotype, there were policies and cultural ideas that were as ugly as that, and actually uglier, because they had implementation and they were enforced. So, if you can connect with students and say, "Okay, yes. This is ugly, and guess what? You're right to have a reaction where you want to be like stop, shut it down!" We have a conversation where you're like, "Okay, listen. You have to be able to see these things and then have a conversation after it. You can't shut down the mechanism that is showing you things, because then you're getting rid of mechanisms that actually express situations that actually need attention and need fixing." It's not about promoting something ugly, it's about promoting something virtuous that society is seeing as ugly that you need the right to keep it in the face of the larger public so that they can be educated to the fact that it is not ugly or that it is ... You know what I'm saying.

Dwayne Booth: We're talking about human beings, because really, when it comes down to it, when you think about prejudice; it's a version of stupidity. It's ignorance. What do you need to do with ignorance? You don't shove those people into a dark closet and bang on the outside and say that you're bad. You have to figure out how to communicate and how to educate them out of their pre-conceived

notions of hate, short-sightedness, all of these things. Of course, some people are going to be psychotic and you're not going to be able to do that with them, but by-and-large, the majority just deserve the respect to be wrong in public, and then the grace of conversation afterwards, even though it's a difficult conversation to have.

Speaker 1: You said earlier that you did stand-up. What was that like? Did you do that for very long?

Dwayne Booth: No, I did it just a little bit, and I didn't ... It was really instructive for me, because I thought that's what I wanted to do, and this was way ... I mean, this is a while ago. This is 1986, 1987. So it was a long time. Nobody was alive then, I don't think that I interact with your event ... The idea was, because as I had said, I dropped out of college and I thought it was an "in" for stage satire. At that time, my heroes were Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks, who was the only sort of contemporary that I really, really loved, and [Mort Sal 00:17:37], who was back in the '60s and so forth.

Dwayne Booth: I found that that world did not really exist anymore. Just to use an example, Bill Hicks, who was a comedian at the time, could never get any really good stand-up gigs in the United States, because his stuff was political. People didn't want to hear at that time. This is the 80s. This is, if you know your history, this is when Reagan, Bush senior were president, so the conservative movement and the moral majority were a really huge, influential factor in just how public dialogue was expressed. So using political humor from the stand-up stage was not really ... You know, you had Gallagher. If you know who that is, whose act was smashing watermelons with a giant hammer. And then what? And now, somebody who is going to talk about subsidy misuse? You don't have that on the same bill.

Dwayne Booth: So, when I started to do it, not that my stuff was political, it was a little more odd, intellectual, strange humor. I didn't ... I saw the other acts that were going on, and it was all very cheap humor to me, but everybody was laughing. At all the comedy clubs, there's always a drink minimum, so people are actually out here just to get drunk and have a good time. Like, I don't know if that's who wants to hear me. I would begin my act, and I would start doing it, and I was getting laughs in spots that were not that funny to me. If you go to comedy clubs, you're sort of conditioned to hear intonation. You're supposed to ... You know, hear the rise and the fall of point. If you make a point, quite often, people are just cued. This is where the laugh is supposed to be. They may not even necessarily think it's funny, but that's the energy of the room, and that's when I realized, "You know what? I actually work in the longer form." I expect a little bit of a different reaction.

Dwayne Booth: I don't like to create cartoons that are just like, "Oh! This is this. This mousetrap is supposed to do this, and then done!" No. I want it to be like, "Huh? Maybe ha? Wait a minute, why am I laughing? Wait, should I be thinking about this?"

Speaker 1: It's a strange thing to reconcile, isn't it? Whenever you say something to somebody and they laugh, but you never meant for it to be funny?

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, yeah, yeah! Yeah, and it is interesting, because I did curate an exhibit for the University of ... Well, that was one that I did, but I'm thinking about one from USC that I brought here that was at Penn, and it was about the history of political cartooning. Just to your point, this was a really interesting experiment that I did: One of the images that I had in the show was a cartoon that I was getting every single year on the anniversary of 9/11, and it was super dark. It was a strange, dark, unsigned anonymous cartoon, and what it was was drawn as if it were for a Hallmark greeting card. There were the Twin Towers, and then there were two planes ready to go into the towers, and the Twin Towers had big, happy faces and the airplanes had happy faces. It said, "Happy 9/11 day!"

Dwayne Booth: Right? Super unnerving to look at, but it's so inappropriate that people would look at it and laugh. Because there is a certain delicious quality to doing the most inappropriate thing. You do it with your friends. You trust your friends with that kind of humor, right? It's really ... it's the equivalent of a thrill ride where it's just like there is a certain level of danger, implicit in this image, just like there's a certain level of danger implicit in a rollercoaster ride. It's thrilling, right? So long as you know you're not going to be killed by it.

Speaker 1: Do you have people who you test your cartoons with?

Dwayne Booth: I never test before I send, but probably the person I trust the most in reading what my cartoons are is my brother, my older brother.

Speaker 1: Oh.

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, and so he ... In fact, this is such an odd sensation. I work very quickly, and I try to communicate from the heart when I am rendering my stuff. Sometimes, if I'm angry or if I'm upset, I'm just like, "Yes! This is it, and this is what I think and feel about this!" Then I publish it, and I will literally look at it months later, and I'm not even 100% sure if I get it, and he always gets it. So there's been times when I'm just like, "What was I trying to say with this cartoon?" And I'll ask him and he'll explain it to me, because he remembers how it was plugged into the news cycle and what peg it was trying to comment on, so he gets me way, way much better than I do.

Speaker 1: Do you drink coffee or anything like that to prepare yourself?

Dwayne Booth: I just drink coffee for life. Yes.

Speaker 1: That works. Does it ... Do you find that helpful? Or do you find that you sometimes have ideas in your caffeine buzz that you look at later and you're like, "This is not [crosstalk 00:22:55],"-

Dwayne Booth: Well, it's not bad. I'm not mainlining my coffee. No. It's just I actually have to drink less coffee, because I found out ... Maybe I guess it's been about a year and a half ago. I was drinking so much coffee and taking so much Advil, and having so very little sleep, because I was just very busy that I've had a history of ocular migraines, which are migraines that don't hurt.

Speaker 1: Oh, that's a thing?

Dwayne Booth: It is a thing, and you can have an ocular migraine with pain involved, but mine are just vision, sort of [tunnel-y 00:23:30], and they don't hurt. So, I don't know exactly that's what I'm experiencing. But the combination of the stuff that I was doing, lack of sleep and all this stuff, I had this thing that is very, very rare. It's called "transient global amnesia." I think that's what it's called. So, I lost my memory for a day. I knew some things, but not-

Speaker 1: How did you find out that you lost your memory for a day?

Dwayne Booth: I was working. It was the very first day of my twin daughters ... It was the very first day of school for them, so I had gotten them all fine, and then I sat down and started working in Photoshop, putting some things together, and all of a sudden, I found myself just like, "Wait a minute. I don't remember how to do this." I don't read ... Anybody who does Photoshop, you're just used to where the drop-down menus are, and you just know. I'm not reading anymore, I just know where everything is. All of a sudden, I found myself just like not knowing where I was looking at as far as drop-down menus. I'm like, "I'm just tired."

Dwayne Booth: Then I said, "I'll just work on some emails." I went, and I was just like, "Who is this? I don't know who this person is." I opened it up, and I'm like, "Oh, I know who that person is." I answered them, closed it and was looking at other things. "Oh, I've got a new email. Gee, I don't know who that is." I open it up, "Oh, I just answered them two minutes ago." Then I was like, "I don't remember answering them." I called my wife, and she's a teacher, and she didn't pick up. So I'm like, "All right. You never know that this is the time that I'm going to drop dead." I'm just like, "What's going on?" I didn't know what it was. I'm like, "Am I going to have a brain aneurysm and all of a sudden just drop dead?" I'm like, "All right, I can't have my kids come home and find me laying dead in the living room."

Dwayne Booth: So I went out. I just walked the neighborhood, waiting drop dead, hoping somebody would find me so my kids discovered my body when they came home. Finally, my wife called and I told her what was going on, and ... But then I felt fine, because I wasn't testing myself. Then when she got home, I tested myself and I had no idea of various things. So yeah, I went in and I had to stay overnight and was woken up every 20 minutes by a nurse who would hold a children's book up in front of me and say, "Point to the red balloon."

Speaker 1: Did you do it?



Dwayne Booth: Yes, yes. By then, it had worn off. That's when they diagnosed me. They said, "It's extremely rare." And yes, with people that sort of over-indulge with anything that's going to shrink your brain, whatever. Advil and coffee and all that stuff does to your physiology, and they said it will probably never happen again. So, I drink a little less coffee.

Speaker 1: Well, that sounds reasonable.

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, yeah. Although it might be interesting to see what I could create with just my mind completely lost.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Dwayne Booth: There is an appeal to that, I guess.

Speaker 1: So Stan Lee just died, and I know that's a very different kind of drawing, but did he have any kind of influence on you?

Dwayne Booth: He ... It's Spider-Man, which he is connected with, is the only comic book that I read when I was a kid. It's because that I loved the vulnerability of Peter Parker. His life was really horrible. You know, losing his uncle and just being very timid, and not getting the girl, having high-school problems. I was like, "Wow, that's amazing!" It was the first time where I looked at a superhero where you're like, "Wow, wouldn't that be great to do that?" But I don't know if I would like the other part of his life. That complication, I really, really, really loved. So, thank you Stan Lee.

Speaker 1: Cool. What are you reading right now?

Dwayne Booth: I am reading a couple of things. I'm almost done with the Norm MacDonald memoir that he wrote a couple of years ago, which is really, really great. I have just finished a book of essays by my favorite poet, Donald Hall, who died six months ago, maybe? I think his book came out right after he died, but they're essays on reflecting on turning 90. Which are really poignant and really, really interesting. It's a strange thing for somebody my age to like, I think.

Speaker 1: Does 90 feel any different than 80, you have to wonder.

Dwayne Booth: To him? Not necessarily, but you do have to wonder that. But it's really interesting, because it's called "A Carnival of Losses". It's really apropos that you have a poet talking about this subject, because he can talk about the loss of faculties, falling down, losing his teeth. All of these things that are really ... Could be very, very depressing in a sort of a really scary way, but he paints it in such a way that is just poetic to something that everybody is going to be facing. So yes, I'm reading that. I also have these histories of jazz and beat culture, and 1950s culture, and stuff always going. I've got four books sitting next to my nightstand with that.

Speaker 1: So you like jazz?

Dwayne Booth: I do. Yeah, and I work a lot to jazz. I tell my kids, my students this. The origins of jazz are just a great analogy to the responsibility of artists. I usually talk to them about bebop jazz and freeform jazz, and the idea that that was music that was not created for commercial reasons. These musicians were not wanting to sell records and make lots of money. They were engaged in the art form, because they were on a quest. It was an exploration about the human experience in uncharted territories. It was a ... You know, you engage in that and you don't have any fans, all you have are critics. But you keep going, and then the people who are listening to you start to recognize that, "Oh, this actually reflects this personal relationship with the world too."

Dwayne Booth: That wandering and that abstraction, the nuance of those colors that are not necessarily even named yet. I know what that feels like and looks like, and then as an artist, you tend to meet the audience halfway, and then it's become something really precious, because it is outside of the commodification of art, and then it becomes a real expression of truthfulness that is not being molested by capitalism and the need to make a buck. It eventually will be, but I just really have always loved that outlaw mentality, and that desire to chart the un-chartable.

Speaker 1: What late night comedian do you think is funny right now?

Dwayne Booth: I wouldn't even say that there's anybody that I would say, "Yes, I like this person." There are certain things that I hear. You know, the little things that Jimmy Kimmel can do, and Colbert can sometimes do. Seth Myers can be really, really funny. John Oliver, I really like. He's pretty consistent with what I really appreciate what his show is about. It's much more conversational, and it exposes the complication of the democratic experiment that we're all victimized by, or satisfied by.

Dwayne Booth: The problem with the so-called "late night comedians" and the fact that's where people think satire resides now is ... Nobody has their own voice. You're naming people that are part of these gigantic conglomerates that have, if not, overt control over what they say. A certain influence on how they say it. If you watch ... I give examples of when Jon Stewart was on the Daily Show, which I found fantastic and heart-breaking sometimes, because he would sometimes find himself engaged in a conversation with some people, speaking honestly with how he felt about things. For example, I forget who was on, but he was talking about the ... That every president of the 20th century and into the 21st century, the majority of them, yes, were criminals.

Dwayne Booth: If you're going to look at the world court and try to determine what they should or shouldn't have done, yes, criminality there. The person he's talking to said, "So, Truman? Would you say that he's a war criminal for dropping the atomic bomb?" And Jon Stewart was like, "Yes. Yes, I would." There was all this blow

back, and there were people who said that he had to apologize, and he apologized the next day, the next time he was on or something. That was heartbreaking to me.

Speaker 1: What is an overrated virtue?

Dwayne Booth: Patriotism. Absolutely. Yeah.

Speaker 1: How so?

Dwayne Booth: Well, I mean, it's the last refuge of the scoundrel, as Mark Twain would say, or did say. Because just as you've heard ... Just the through line of all of what we've been talking about is the danger of affiliating yourself with a morality that is more connected with your concept of the team you belong to, rather than the bigger picture. There are certain things in this culture, let me just say, in America, that yes, I'm glad that we have that as a language, getting back to jazz. But then I ask the question, "Hey, where did jazz come from?" Let's look at it. It's the blues. Where did all this come from? Oh, it was this group of people that we enslaved and that needed to find a voice that expressed their humanity and something to cling onto that was an expression of hope for them, and acknowledgement of the horrors that they were going through.

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, okay, it produced jazz and blues, and something that is really, really wonderful, but what caused it? The idea of just drawing lines ... I mean, this is, again, where I'm going to end up sounding very "kumbaya" and so much like that. Really, we have to start thinking in bigger families. I don't watch sports. I'll give that to my older brother, it's one of the things he's most jealous of me for, because he does, and it makes him crazy. He's like, "I can just watch, and if the Eagles lose, I'll be sad for the next couple of days. I know it's ridiculous and I know it's stupid, and you don't have that." And I'm glad that I don't, because it's about erasing lines.

Dwayne Booth: I hate the idea of just drawing lines, you know? The idea that we're all not a global community ... Again, I just start to sound like I should be sitting here, just braiding my hair and-

Speaker 1: I think the world could use some kumbaya right now.

Dwayne Booth: I know! It's really important, and there's lots of people, like Gary Schneider, who is a poet. He hung out with the Beatles for a while, and he was also a philosopher, basically, of eastern thought and so forth. He was an environmentalist and pushing environmentalism since the 50s, before it became really, really popular to do that, and he would talk about that constantly, about the fact that we can't ... If we need to think about a group of people who are contained with a singular mission, we need to think bigger.

Dwayne Booth: Okay, let's not talk about America's responsibility to the environmental problem. Let's talk about North America, right? Let's talk about the Western Hemisphere. Let's talk about things where those systems need cooperation from that region, because those systems do not operate in accordance to states, city-states, concepts of those borders. They don't. Right? You have to know where the stream originates to recognize that ... You know, I can clean up a lake, right? But if the origin of the lake is somewhere that I have no control over, and it is just full of garbage and there's just no plan to fix it, what's the point of me cleaning up the lake? Everything is systemic, and so it's a matter of recognizing what the systems are. When it comes to human beings, the idea of breaking them up into different tribes like we have is ... It's so obviously detrimental that I shouldn't even have to point it out. It should be very clear to people.

Speaker 1: It's almost funny how we started to think that way more with medicine, where it seems pretty obvious, but like you were saying with some of these environmental issues [crosstalk 00:37:42]-

Dwayne Booth: And it's not that ... Right, right. And even political issues. Yeah, it's not even that. People don't even get the opportunity to consider other people's value systems. Right, and to know that they're not a threat. It's just like the analogy that is as simple as you can make it: Everybody has their favorite color. Everybody has the same exact favorite color. You're convinced that it's great. The favorite color that I have in my mind, I'm just like, "Yes, I know that it is the best color. That is why it's my favorite color." Somebody who has a different favorite color is not in judgment against your favorite color. It shouldn't be. Everybody can think and feel differently, so everybody will think and feel differently. Get used to that. The multiplicity of that is the normal state of things.

Speaker 1: What is your favorite color?

Dwayne Booth: It is blue foil.

Speaker 1: Foil?

Dwayne Booth: It has to be on foil.

Speaker 1: Plot twist.

Dwayne Booth: Yeah. I brought this up with people, and they get angry. They're like, "That's a texture!" I'm like, "Listen. You asked my favorite color. It's blue foil." I must have seen it when I was very small, around Christmas time. Getting tired of red foil that they used quite often for Christmas decorations. I saw blue foil, and I was just like, "This is the most amazing thing I've ever seen." I still have the same reaction. I'll fight anybody who says otherwise.

Speaker 1: Where is your favorite spot on campus? Where do you like to spend time?

Dwayne Booth: I ... Wow. Let me think about that. It's funny, because it's not ... It's a more transient thing for me. I would say my favorite thing is to move around campus. It's not a spot, although ... Is it the duck pond? Is that what they call it? It's like the Science Pond or something?

Speaker 1: The Bio Pond?

Dwayne Booth: The Bio Pond. I've heard it called, like ... Somebody said, "That's where the ducks are." It's nice to walk over there and sort of hang out. Yeah, but like I said, it's really just ... I love to move around campus.

Speaker 1: What is a good movie you saw recently?

Dwayne Booth: That I saw fresh or that I re-watched?

Speaker 1: Either.

Dwayne Booth: I re-watched Catch 22, the Mike Nichols movie that he made right after The Graduate. Again, it absolutely blew my mind. It's an American movie that is told with a European narrative structure that is great. It's great. It assumes a certain intelligence from the audience, and I really like when a movie does that. I've been re-watching a bunch of movies with my kids. We recently watched a bunch of Hitchcock. We saw some that were on the big screen too, showing them Rear Window or something. It's just really, really great. We're going to go watch the Big Sleep, I think on December 2nd, also in [inaudible 00:40:52]. Which, they're really, really excited by.

Dwayne Booth: It's great. It's great to show some of these things to younger people who think that anything even five years ago is old, particularly a black and white movie. It's just like, "Are you kidding? They didn't even have enough ... We were so uncivilized, we couldn't even figure out how to get color in our movies? You want me to go sit through that?" I just also watched a bunch of Orson Wells. The Third Man, which was really, really stunning to watch.

Speaker 1: What is your ideal happiness?

Dwayne Booth: My ideal happiness is-

Speaker 1: Or your happy place, you could even say.

Dwayne Booth: It's so funny, because I have that experience for no good reason, every single time I wake up. My happy place is not knowing what is going to happen, and having a certain delight and anticipation that I'll either be able to say something snarky about it as it's happening, or I'll be able to have an insight that will surprise me, and then surprise people I want to communicate it to. It's really ... Any moment when I am able to be present-centered, and I'm not reflecting on something or anticipating something.

Dwayne Booth: If you think about it, that's really ... The majority of people, most of the time, are either thinking about something, where they have to do or where they have to be; or they're thinking about something that's sort of just happened, whether it was a good thing, how that's going to affect what's going to happen to them in the future. It's very hard to find that sort of present-centered space, and as somebody who has done ... You have to be present-centered when you create art, and you have to be present-centered when you engage in and take in art.

Dwayne Booth: It's one of the things when you're going and looking at a painting or something, for example. It demands immediate face time in the present, and you communicate with something in the moment that you're actually existing in. I find that really important, because you're actually engaged in the truth of the moment. That's as close as you're going to get to reality. Sure, you might be in that situation and misinterpreting it, but the experiential joy of it is that you're actually engaged in a real moment in the here and now. So that's my happy place, it's when I am not distracted by concepts that pull me out of the moment that I'm actually existing in.

Speaker 1: Mood plays a really big role in interpretation, I think.

Dwayne Booth: Yeah.

Speaker 1: I often watch a movie and wonder if it's that I don't like, or I was just kind of hating anything I watched in that moment, you know?

Dwayne Booth: Right, and it can also function in a different way. For an airplane feeling for me is ... I don't know what happens to me. I have seen some of the worst movies on airplanes that I've been convinced are the greatest things I've ever seen. I saw that M. Night Shyamalan movie, the Lady in the Lake, or the lady in the water or something? People don't even know what it is, it's so bad. But I had never even heard of it, and it had Paul Giamatti in it. I was traveling out to California, and it involved ... Giamatti had lost his ... I think it was either his wife or his girlfriend. She had died, and he was sort of reclusive.

Dwayne Booth: Basically, it's just like by the end of the movie, he realizes that he's been in his pain and that he misses his wife. So I'm sitting here ... I'm not kidding, I watched it. I was glued to it. It got to the end with Paul Giamatti breaking down about the ... I'm crying on the airplane. Crying. I get home and I tell my wife, I'm just like, "I saw the most amazing movie. I need for you to watch this movie with me." "Well, what's it called?" I look at it on Rotten Tomatoes, on Rotten Tomatoes, it's like 19% on there or something. I'm like, "Oh my gosh!" I look at the reviews, and they're just like, "He should never be allowed to make another movie after this turd."

Speaker 1: Those are rough moments too, because then you have to wonder if you have bad taste, but at the same time, you're kind of glad to have a smart opinion about something-

Dwayne Booth: No, I'm telling you, it's the movie! Yeah! I saw a movie, I forget what it was called, but it had Lil' Bow-Wow in it from 10 years ago, and I was just like, "This is the funniest thing I've ever seen?" They think it's terrible, so I can't ... I don't watch movies on airplanes and then tell people my review of it, because I am absolutely wrong. I don't know what it is.

Speaker 1: It must be the airplane.

Dwayne Booth: It is. It's absolutely the airplane.

Speaker 1: If you could live somewhere else, where would you live, in terms of another country?

Dwayne Booth: I've always been really interested in living in Berlin or Germany, and only because I know somebody who actually lives in Berlin, and I love ... Getting back to environmentalism; that kind of activism and looking forward to the future in a way that is proactively self-sustaining. It's in their politics, so that's really meaningful to me. Minus the disgusting fascism of that country that has reared its ugly head in the past, it's always been a culture that has been very curious about artistic and intellectual pursuit. So I've been interested in that, but also my wife's family is from Spain.

Dwayne Booth: So like, Spain and Portugal as far as a beautiful place to live, and one that is ... Like emotionally open to a joy of living, I could also really get into that. I've also been really interested in Japan.

Speaker 1: Oh yeah?

Dwayne Booth: Yeah, because their love and appreciation for the stuff that I'm most interested in, like the pop culture from the 60s in particular, the fact that they ... They have so many Beatles bootlegs of it that are available. They always have, and they've always loved the vinyl culture, LP's and so forth. I've always been really interested in going and seeing what that feels like on the ground there. You know? And design elements, I mean, I just really find the Japanese sensibility something I would love to live amongst for a while.

Speaker 1: What gives you hope?

Dwayne Booth: What gives me hope is the conversations that I have with people about ... about having hope in what generally feels like a hopeless situation. You know, if you just look at the news feed, if you're just like, "Oh my gosh. We're doomed. There is lots of stuff that is going on that is just really threatening," and yes, there are things that are threatening. But there's also the connection ... There's a mutuality that I think if I can express a mutuality with people around me, whether it's students, friends, strangers; it reminds me that I'm not alone. It reminds people I engage with that they're not alone, and that we can congregate around a moment where we can say, "Yes, we're having a moment

of laughter. We're having a moment of insight, and that is the only thing that we can cling to for any hope of survival as a species, and look, it feels right. So let's keep doing it."

Speaker 1:

This podcast is a production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. We hope you'll join us again soon for another session of Office Hours.