

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Story Cure: An Interview with Eve Ensler

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to the Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today Mark speaks with Eve Ensler. Eve Ensler is a Tony Award-winning playwright and activist. Best known for her play, “The Vagina Monologues,” which has been translated into 48 languages and in 140 countries around the world, Eve has been named one of Newsweek’s “150 Women Who Changed the World” and the Guardian’s most 100 influential women. Eve is the author of many other plays and books including most recently, “In the Body of the World,” a memoir about her healing journey through cancer. In 1998 she created V-Day, a global activist movement to stop violence against women and girls which has raised over 100 million dollars to date to fund 13,000 community-based anti-violence programs and safe houses in the democratic republics of Congo, Haiti, Kenya, Egypt and Iraq, and elsewhere. In a passionate and riveting interview, Mark talked with Eve about her life as an artist, survivor, and seeker, and the connection between storytelling and self-realization.

MM: Welcome, Eve. I’m so happy to talk to you today. I’d like to discuss the connection between storytelling and survival. Anthropologists call us *homo narrans*, the story telling ape. They point to the evolutionary connection between storytelling and human survival. I’d like to start by asking you: How has story operated in your own life as a tool for survival as well as your own self-realization?

EE: That’s a great question and a huge question. I’ve been reading a lot of books about paganism culture, pre-historic culture and how storytelling distinguished human beings and allowed us both a way of imagining, conceiving and foretelling the future of storytelling as well as having an awareness of ourselves in the present tense. I think for me, where I’ve always been connected to storytelling—sometimes when you’re in the midst of violence or trauma, or difficulty, you can lose your way, you can lose your perspective. You can become numb and you become separated from yourself. I think one of the things that storytelling does is that it gives you perspective. It carves out a way of making sense in your situation. It also gives you voice in a situation where you may be voiceless, and can give you an inkling of power in a situation where you may be powerless. I think also, for me the best reason for telling stories is that they encourage, inspire, catalyze imagination. If we are short of anything right now in the times we are living in, it’s imagination. Everything has become so highly mechanized. We are so distrustful of myths, so distrustful of storytelling. We think that rational logic is the triumph. We are so deeply in need of imagination. What stories do is that they catalyze those muscles which propel the imagination.

MM: Why do you think we’re so distrustful of myths?

EE: Ever since rational intelligence became dominant there is such an inherent trust that myths and storytelling, poetic understanding of the world, and ambiguity is somehow a lesser form of intelligence. Point of fact, it’s science and technology and rational logic that has brought us here to a large degree. I actually think that in the times we’re living in, we need to question deeply what rational intelligence has done for us. I would argue, and it’s something I’ve really been thinking about, everything associated with myth, a lot that is associated with storytelling, so much of how people communicated, the story of

the earth, the moving of the earth and the way the earth operated, were through the stories that were told. To both make sense of the earth, to cherish the earth to honor the earth, to celebrate the earth, to create rituals that would give thanks to the earth, meaning to the earth. I think that when that kind of separation happens between the mind and the spirit, the separation between the body and the mind which happens through patriarchal dominance, then, storytelling and myth making is forced to go underground, it goes unconscious where so much gets pushed to the bottom rather than being part of the everyday world. In a way, the reverse needs to happen. It's like things just got pushed to the bottom.

We have to rely on storytelling, we have to rely on myth making, we have to rely on our intuition and our premonitions and our vision. If anything, these may guide us out of this really destructive period.

MM: In your own life, Eve, how was discovering your own voice and your ability as a writer to tell story connect you to how you survived the difficulties and the confusions that you came through?

EE: I think that whenever you're in a situation where somebody has power over you, whether there's a tyranny, whether there's racism or sexism or classism, or in your own family where there is a dominant father who makes up everybody's opinion and tells everybody how they will think and they will behave, obviously you begin to lose your ability to exist outside that structure and you begin to dissolve into that structure. And I think for me at a very young age, I remember having a journal and book, after terrible things would happen in my family, I would go and I would write and tell stories. I would make up things and invent things. It was almost like I needed to crystallize that persona, to make that persona into something concrete on the page to keep some alternative voice, to keep some internal self in me alive.

It's so interesting. I was reading some Jung recently in "Memories, Dreams and Reflections" where he actually talked about his selves. One that existed in the shadow self and one that existed in the light, and I think, for me, storytelling was a way of actualizing a part of me that was being disappeared through violence and domination.

MM: And over the years, as you've told your story in different forms, has your version of yourself also evolved?

EE: It's interesting. Yes. Hopefully, I've told my story but I've also told stories that I've both heard and imagined of other women. In the process of that, I think one of the great things about storytelling is that we can imagine another story. Right? I think all of us get born into a particular story.

For instance, 'this' is your story, 'this' is going to be the story of your life. You were born, you were abused, etc., now you're going to have the right trajectory, which is your story. But when we actually tell stories, we discover very quickly that stories are

valuable, stories are not fixed, are not absolute, are not simply that somebody made it up and now you get to make it up.

I've been working a lot on the Adam and Eve myth. It was a myth, in fact, someone told that story and a lot of people bought into that story and there was a lot of energy around that story. In fact, it is a story. There is something about the authority that we project onto stories, we give them this authority. We give this authority in our own lives and in the collective story that gets told. What I'm seeing more and more is that we get to make the stories up. We get to change the stories, we get to transform the stories.

MM: Right.

EE: It's up to us to do that, nothing is fixed. Nothing is hardened, nothing is a given. The only 'givens' are what we accept as given. When you write stories and create stories, you realize the malleability of your stories. We are the engineers of our stories. We get to make stuff up. Making stories up serves the greater interest of the good. I think there are many myths that have outworn their welcome, they're no longer serving us, they never did serve us, but they're so transparent, they are obviously no longer serving us. And part of what we have to do is during this time is be brave storytellers, be courageous mythmakers where we say, "No. Here's the new myth we're writing, here's the new story we are telling." We can have a lot to do with our survival because we can only travel as far as our stories travel. We can't go past the parameters of our stories.

What we have to do is expand those parameters to much more transcendent places, to much more transformative places, and not be locked in by patriarchal stories, racist stories, classes stories—stories where we already know the outcome, where we're already acting out the outcome.

MM: I love that thought, that we can only travel as far as our stories travel. It makes complete sense.

Victor Frankl said that suffering minus meaning equals despair. I'm wondering how does storytelling connect to the creation of meaning, do you think, in our personal life and in our cultural life?

EE: Again, it's fascinating because here's a story of a fallen world where everything that happens to humanity from the beginning is doomed, finished, and we have to turn our wills over to some god who's going to hopefully save us in the next world, or is this a world where we're actually living in divinity and we have enormous choice over cherishing and creating and imagining this world we want to live in. In fact, we have. One story gives me a lot of despair. That first story feels very despairing to me. The story of how we're born into hell, that we're doomed as human beings, that we can't ever evolve, that only a higher god can save us, blah, blah, blah. I feel like we have to start creating the stories that give our lives meaning. Part of that, again is up to us. We have

for so long turned out stories over to those in power. This has sunk us in meaning and despair.

Even the story of climate crisis, we can look at this in many different ways. Every other day I'm creating a new story. On any given day, we have the time, we can create a new world where we're living in much more interconnectedness and oneness, where growth and consumption is not the modality and we're taking of one another, and other days it's past that and we're just preparing for how we're going to leave this world. I don't know which story is true, nobody does. It seems to me on any given day, which story gives my life more meaning and which is going to make me more committed to the struggle, which is going to make me work harder, which is going to make me more loving, which is going to make me work harder to save the planet. I'll choose the first story. Do you know what I mean?

It may be wrong, we may have already destroyed our planet. There is way too much carbon release, the fossil fuels may never end. To some degree, all stories are stories. We're making this up as we go along. Why not create a story that's going to motivate you, inspire you, it seems to me, or at least create in you the possibility to continue on. Even if you're deluding yourself.

MM: And then, I think it's a hard thing for people because they're trying to figure out which story is true and making the story's power dependent on whether or not it's true. I think a lot of people lose the opportunity to pick and choose and shape their own version of things. Your understanding of story is that it's always changing. It doesn't have to be the absolute truth to be a tool.

EE: Exactly. And what is true? I'll give you an example.

When I went through chemotherapy I got a frame for that from my friend Sue. She said, "Okay, this chemo's going to burn away everything that needs to be burned away in your past, in your stories, the violence in your past, everything that went on with your father, every violent story you heard about rape...." I like that story. That story worked for me.

(Mark chuckles)

I don't know if that's a true story. But you know what? I went into the experience with a deep belief in the possibility of that story. It actually changed me.

There's also how much of the story and the belief in the story is actually writing the story. How much is our commitment to a story making the story actually come alive? I think about that often. How many times in my life I've seen people in my life whose story is so different even in similar situations. Two people get cancer and one person says, "This is the end, I'm finished. This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me, I'm hopeless and helpless, I can't get out of this." They don't want to release that story. Another person who says, "You know what? I'm going to fight this, I see this as a transformative experience, it's going to take me down to the bottom of my soul, I'm

going to get to wrestle with demons whether I live or die, I'll be closer to my dharma." That's a completely different outcome. Even if they both end up getting well or they both end up dying there are different outcomes.

MM: Yes.

EE: I think so often the stories we tell are an art, that's how I put it. Constructing the story is art. It's not always the architecture of where you're going but it's the highway.

MM: We imagine ourselves forward through story, we can chose which direction, which kind of a route we want to take. Is that what you are saying?

EE: I think so. Often, it may not always work out, the way we've told our stories. My experience is that when I write a story and fully give myself to that story, often the story happens. If I say, for example, "I am doomed in love," I see those pieces, etc. Guess what? The chances are good I'm doomed in love. We write ourselves into things. I'm not being Pollyanna to think that there aren't systems like neo capitalism, or capitalism, or racism, or patriarchy that don't oppress people. I'm not saying you can write yourself out of those systems. I think you can write yourself INTO having power in those systems, having resistance in those systems, having vision for another system that you can fight for. I think those stories are really important.

MM: Absolutely. I think what you're talking about is a difference between healing and curing. We can't always cure the disease, whether the disease is cancer or patriarchy in a given situation, but we can heal within the context of those given circumstances by becoming more whole, aware and connected with our truth.

EE: I think one of the problems with the stories that were already written is that they were always disempowering the people. The people that were marginalized, the people not in power always lose. How do we write the new stories where we triumph, where people come together, where all of those supposed givens are under massive question? That's really what has to happen right now; authority has to be under massive question and we just can't accept anything as a given.

MM: Right. How do you think having a spiritual perspective on oneself and the world affects the kind of stories that we tell and the reach of our stories?

EE: It's such a complicated word, spiritual, and it means so much to so many different people.

MM: What does it mean to you?

EE: I was reading something very interesting in a brilliant book, "The Great Cosmic Mother," and she said something really interesting about Marx that I found really compelling, noting how Marxism made a brilliant strategy for economics and for wellbeing, for connecting and how people can live, but that it was so consciously

separated, so profoundly and excessively separated from the spirit, it never engaged the amount of people or the depth of people the way it could have. She was talking about a new age that has gone one direction by making everything spiritual and individual and transcendent, and the political world has gone the other direction by making everything literal and point to point to point, but cutting it off from the spirit, in an embarrassment. I think the next evolving is a mystical politics, a way in which we bring these forces together. I think the separation of the spirit and the mind and the body has been the most oppressive separation. As women we've always known that separation and it's deadly; I think we're evolving into a time when the spirit can't be separated.

It's so interesting. Even looking at the pope right now, looking at climate change as a spiritual issue or a moral issue. We have to look at the spiritual dimensions of it as well as the political dimensions, as well as the psychological and emotional dimensions. It has to be integrated now. One of the things I'm really struck by, spending the summer here in such a beautiful, gorgeous, natural environment, is how the spirit is imbued in everything that is nature and how once we're cut off from nature, once that separation occurs, where nature is seen as a fallen place, a place we had to have dominion over, if you spend any time, even watching a flock of birds, watching them bathe from a pond, watching high grass blow in the wind, or stars, or that twilight hour, you absolutely know that nature is imbued with great spirit. I think that horrible separation is what we have to heal right now and spirit comes into everything. The mind comes into everything and we're a whole being.

MM: You're saying that spirit is a part of everything we do and when we see spirit as separate, that's when it becomes this kind of newfangled, new age-y thing. But when we see spirit as an integral part of what is actually animating creation and animating us, and connecting us, then storytelling becomes holistic.

EE: Yes, and the Bible had one million writings. There were stories getting told all over the world that were told through the body, like the dancing bodies. There is such a combination of people resisting forces in the world, whether they be migrant workers or the rape of domestic workers or the rape of the earth, but they were expressing it through the storytelling. That's really what was going on in their bodies. That was OF the spirit, OF the heart, OF fear's resistance, OF revolution. It was like coming from both a very transcendent place and a practical place at the same time.

MM: Yes. Isn't that what women are all about? Weren't women the vehicles of the transcendent coming into the body and connecting us to the earth?

EE: You know, I was reading something the other day that said females were constructed, the female anatomy is constructed as a bridge between these worlds. It was cutting off from this that severed our ability to bring these two worlds together. There are many women who understand now that we're coming into a time where we have to honor what we know, we have to stand behind what we know and the way we know things and trust our intuition.

I read a great, great article just this morning. Why is it women get harassed for being emotional? It's men's emotions that have brought us here. Isn't that true? Look at war. (both chuckle) It has to do with intuition. We have been taught to not trust those ways of knowing, we've been told to not trust the way of storytelling, not to trust the way of mythmaking and that there is higher logic out there that prevails. This is a time where we have to come back into our bodies and trust our bodies, trust the way our bodies know things, trust the way our bodies feel things.

MM: Well, men are terrified of what women know. And men are scared of women's stories.

EE: That does sound like a story to be "true." I think in a way, men are scared not to know. I think we have to give permission to everybody to not know, to be lost, to not have to have the path to create the way. I think what patriarchy did was to create a tyranny for men so that if they didn't know the answer, if they didn't know the way, if they didn't know what was going on, they couldn't direct things. If they couldn't control things, they were failures. I think there are so many men that are oppressed by that tyranny. I think it's a very paradoxical thing. We all have to be lost together right now, we all have to imagine and go into the depths of our imaginations right now. But, we all have to be lost together.

Somebody can't be pretending they know what's going on. That's the problem, because when you pretend you know what's going on, you're at some hierarchy "above" level, even though you have no idea what you're talking about. We all have to be in this big mess together where we get to say, "You know what? We're lost." From that "lost," how do we put our most imaginative energies, evolution of the solution of the next consciousness, that needs to evolve for humanity to continue? To me, that's all we should be thinking about. What is the next evolutionary consciousness that needs to happen? The only way that I know of is through storytelling. We have to be able to picture it, to see it, we have to be able to imagine it. Because if we can't see where we're going, I don't know how we'll get there.

MM: If we can't tell the truth about where we are, we can't possibly begin in a way that's effective and that means, like you are saying, admitting that we don't know.

This brings me to my last question. It's about telling the truth.

We rarely tell the whole truth about ourselves or our world. Without doing that we can't change. What do you say to people who believe it's best to leave the past behind us rather than examine our pains and losses and question the value of truth telling as a part of spiritual survival?

EE: Here's what I think.

I don't think there's any way forward without telling the truth on the subject of the past and getting as close as we can. We know the truth is always evading us, always evading

us the closer we get to it. I will say, all we have to do right now is look at the story of race in America. All we have to do is look at the fact that nine churches have been burned since the horrible, horrible shooting in Charleston and look at the racism that is still there at the core of the country. You can trace it. You can trace it back to the death of Martin Luther King, to Malcolm X, you can trace it back to the silencing of the story. It just went underground; it stopped being talked about, there stopped being a dialogue, we stopped dealing with all the layers of racism, all the tentacles of racism, all the ways we would have to un-colonize ourselves, each and every one of us, to live in a world where race is free. I think that's a perfect example of this question: Do we know our history? Do we know what happened in this country, do we know how many indigenous people died for this country to be born? Do we know how many slaves were brought here? What happened to the slaves?

How do we possibly move forward without an understanding of what people have survived in their DNA? What collective story is running through their systems of running and oppression?

And that's just one example.

I know for me, in my own personal life, there's no way of moving forward without moving back. No way. I think this story of America is the story of amnesia.

I remember when Ronald Reagan died, people were mourning him and weeping for him. I thought, *are you kidding?* Do we remember what Ronald Reagan did to this country? And it was as if that had never happened. I think one of the deadliest disorders we have in America is amnesia. We don't hold our memories, we don't honor our dead, we don't think of and honor and cherish those who've been oppressed, enslaved and those who died for things and that we don't bring them into everything we do every day of our lives. Somehow they're separated. Again, that's separation.

MM: And that happens in the name of survival. People think we just have to keep moving forward and not look back. That, of course, just leads to repeating and repeating the mistakes of the past.

EE: I think that's always related, Mark, to people's notion of security and people's notion of survival. I have a few things to say about security.

Security is not the panacea; it's not what we're doing here. We're not here to become secure, that isn't the point of our lives. There is no security. We're going to die. At the end of this whole story, there's a whole other story we know nothing about. That's the big story that's coming.

It seems to me, if our story that we were telling ourselves were not laced on this contingency of security, but were laced on the contingency of connection or care or compassion, then we would be interested in the past. Then we would be interested in where people come from, what hurts people and what suffering people have been

engaged in that bring them to the present path. As long as we stay hooked on this security notion, which is completely illusory and also juvenile, when we know straight up it's not gonna happen.

MM: Thank you so much Eve, it's been great to talk to you today. I hope all of you enjoy our conversation.