

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Caravan of No Despair: An Interview with Mirabai Starr

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today Mark speaks with Mirabai Starr. Mirabai Starr is an interspiritual author and speaker who leads retreats internationally on the mystics and contemplative life. She is best known for her acclaimed translations of Dark Night of the Soul and The Interior Castle, as well as God Of Love. Her long-awaited memoir, Caravan of No Despair, is an extraordinary account of the author's search for her lost daughter – a story both intimate and universal – and Starr's fascinating experiences at the epicenter of the American spiritual scene for the past four decades. We spoke recently about her new memoir and the path of healing, grief, and transformation that characterizes her life and work.

MM: Welcome, Mirabai. It's so good to talk to you. You've been one of my favorite writers for a long time and your new memoir is truly extraordinary. I want to start by asking you, why did you call the book *Caravan of No Despair*?

MS: That title is extracted from a Rumi poem that's also inscribed on his tombstone in Konya, Turkey. A couple of lines that I particularly love are: "Come, come, whoever you are, wander, worshipper, lover of leaving. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Even if you've broken your vows a thousand times, come, come again, come." I love the invitational spirit and the affirmation that no matter what has happened, this caravan moving us through the wilderness is not a caravan of despair. My story is one in which not everybody, least of all myself, always plays a heroic role and so this seemed perfect.

MM: And yet this caravan contains despair, doesn't it?

MS: For sure. I would not want to deny the absolutely initiatory fire of our dark times. Definitely in my case the deepest times of sorrow have been the greatest catalyst for transformation in my life. I mean, I might not have designed it that way but that does seem to be a universal human experience that, even though in the moments when we're suffering it's difficult to see any redeeming value, and if anyone suggested that there was some way, we'd be likely to punch them. It's almost undeniable. You know over time, I've never met anyone, hardly anyone, who hasn't actually said that, "The deaths of my beloveds," or, "My cancer diagnosis," or whatever our most harrowing experiences might be, aren't actually the "secret medicine," as Rumi also says, that has given us our greatest gifts.

MM: Why is that? I know it's a huge question but for folks who are listening to this interview it might sound Pollyanna; it might sound like putting a nice, pretty shine on things that are just miserable. How can you speak to someone like that about how this actually happens?

MS: Well, I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me, Mark. You often write, think and hang out with this material. I don't get it; I don't get it. However, I see it again and again and again. And it is true that when you're in the midst of it, not only is it offensive to have someone suggest that there is some silver lining in your suffering but it's just inappropriate... it just doesn't make sense. It's only something that we can recognize. I

think afterwards, although there are certainly moments. For instance, when my fourteen-year-old daughter, Jenny, was killed very suddenly in a car accident in 2001, it's not like I said, "Oh yay, now here's my chance for transformation." As I said, if somebody had – and people did try to suggest such a thing – it really pissed me off. More than pissed me off. It felt like an affront.

But even in the earliest stages of trauma and tragedy, I remember moments where I felt this sense of grace, of breaking in through my shattered heart. Maybe by virtue of the fact that I was shattered, it was able to enter. And this radiance would fill me and hold me. And I've spoken with many grieving people who have experienced that same sense of being kind of catapulted into a sacred space in the wake of a fresh loss. So it's hard to sustain a sense of 'this is ok,' because what happened is not ok. It rarely is ever 'ok.'

However, I think we can tap into that universal experience of the sacred or the holy, or something that feels like unconditional love that, when we are at our most broken, is sometimes the most available to us. And it's definitely not Pollyanna. You know I'm not someone who ever is interested in going for what I think is so beautifully and aptly named "the spiritual bypass." I don't like slapping on spiritual platitudes to harrowing situations. But it's actually the opposite of trying to cram our experience into some neat, tidy package of spiritual logic. It's more a matter of that courageous response of the spiritual warrior who is willing to show up for what is, and to sit in that fire.

MM: What is the connection between loss of control and what you're calling the sacred?

MS: Yeah, that's a beautiful question. It is very much a matter of, as Pema Chodron so beautifully says, "being in your groundlessness." And being groundless is the ultimate lack of control. Instead of trying to fix something broken – your heart for instance – what we're doing is actually saying 'yes' to what is, even if 'what is' is an unutterable mystery. And not trying to remedy our situation or manipulate, or otherwise fill in the emptiness, but actually the opposite, of letting go and yielding. It's what St. John of the Cross, my hero, whose books I have translated previously, *Dark Night of the Soul*. It's what John of the Cross means by dark night of the soul. It's not about being depressed. It's about letting ourselves down into the arms of radical unknowingness, and not trying to control the spiritual crisis that has descended on us, which of course John of the Cross considers to be a great blessing, when we're stripped of everything that we used to use to explain our lives to ourselves, to explain the existence of God, and the way we're supposed to feel that connection with the divine.

It's all taken from us. And that frees us of ourselves. And John says that when the dark night descends – when we're plunged into that emptiness – our only path is stop doing. To actually let go of our spiritual practices. This is a sixteenth century Spanish monk that is saying 'stop your prayers and your rituals.' So all those things that you have used to reliably prop you up in your spiritual life – let them go – and actually just rest in the darkness.

MM: Beautiful. I love how you write about it. In the beginning of the book you write, “In a dark night of the soul, all the ways you have become accustomed to tasting the sacred dry up and fall away. All concepts of the holy one evaporate. You’re plunged into a darkness so impenetrable that you’re convinced it will never lift. You may flail about for something, anything to prop you up but you grasp only emptiness, and so rendered reckless by despair, you let yourself fall backward into the arms of nothing.” That’s so beautiful.

MS: Thank you, Mark.

MM: “Rendered reckless by despair...” What does that mean?

MS: It’s like when you are so shattered, you don’t give a shit anymore. Nothing matters. And so, like when Jenny died, I wanted to die. It wasn’t that I was suicidal. It was that it would be absolutely fine with me if my life ended right then. And I felt this sense of fearlessness, because the thing that I most feared – losing a child – had happened. And I had nothing left to lose. And so there was this kind of spiritual recklessness that I had. I had nothing to hold onto, so might as well try that.

It’s sort of like Tonglen practice. In Tonglen practice, taking and sending, what we do is we tune into whatever it is that is hurting our heart that is making us either uncomfortable or downright despairing. And say it is a break-up, and you feel tremendous jealousy because your beloved is now paying attention to someone else, maybe even sleeping with someone else. So that is fearing pain of jealousy. So in Tonglen practice what you do, of course, is that you tune into it. You become present with that feeling. And you begin to breathe it in and breath out relief from that feeling. And then, it’s like as long as you’re broken and feared-open by pain, you begin to actually breathe in the pain of the whole world. Everyone anywhere who is experiencing the same flavor of pain through jealousy, say.

And there is something incredibly freeing about that practice. It’s very much the kind of practice that I’m talking about that I did do when my daughter died. I didn’t do Tonglen per se because any kind of prescribed practice was not ok with me but I did some version of that intuitively. Just breathe it in and breathe out surrender. And to take in the pain of the world into my own shattered heart.

When Jenny died it was only a few weeks after 9/11, and the whole world was kind of on fire with grieving, or at least the western world, and there was this culpable sense that I had of mothers in war zones who were losing children, who were being bombed, who were experiencing terrible violence and oppression, and something about my broken openness connected me with – especially other mothers – but with the human condition... with other sufferers... everywhere... and not only did I take them into my heart because their pain became my pain, but I felt held in the collective heart of humanity.

You know, I've spent a lifetime feeling kind of special and that went out the window when my daughter died. I'd had a lot of deaths, by the way. I have had a lot of deaths in my life before Jenny, and since, but that one... man that was in a category unto itself. And it was the first time I think that I ever really felt fully connected to the human condition, rather than some elitist creature. This loss made me recognize my place in this human family.

MM: And that brings me to this next question. I wondered first, why it had taken you, do you think, fourteen years to tell this story? And the second part of the question is, how did writing about the experience change your relationship to it?

MS: You know, I did try to write the book several times over the last fourteen years, and each time it kind of read like a journal. Maybe a beautifully uncomposed journal but it was still me processing my pain. And I think it took me all this time to distill it into some kind of elixir that would be something I could serve up to the world so it was nourishing to others, and that it was accessible to others. That it wasn't just my private story. I really strongly believe in the power of storytelling, and that each of our personal stories is a version of the universal story, and that stories are transformational. But that doesn't mean that everything we write and spill out onto paper, or computer, is ready... is accessible... had been transmuted.

You know, that the lead needs to be alchemically transmuted into gold, and I don't know what does that except continual showing up for the experience and authentic... speaking in your authentic voice. I had the benefit of – actually I was asked to write this book by Tami Simon, the publisher of Sounds True – and it was after a podcast that I did with her *Insights at the Edge*, we called it *Naked with the Beloved*. Actually, she named it that and I think it's great. But it was from something about her... she draws out the truth.

And after that interview, and she asked me to write this book, and a friend of mine who is an editor said, "Whatever you do, don't try to make yourself look pretty in this memoir. Just tell the truth. And if it feels like you're going somewhere that's really naked and scary, go there. Be true to that." And that was the permission I needed to tell this story from that radically authentic and often really terrifying place. I mean, I'm terrified now... the book just came out and I feel so naked. It was worth it... so far.

MM: Well you are so raw, and so humble. That's what comes through. There really is no spiritual pretense whatsoever. In fact, I like how you kind of send up the spiritual world. I mean, having grown up the way you did with this amazing childhood, and sort of a who's who of American spirituality, you have a gimlet eye when you look at it. You're not someone who seems easily fooled by appearance or self-righteousness and pretense. Is that right?

MS: I appreciate that feedback very much. Yeah, I hope I'm true to what is. I'm definitely not aspiring to be a spiritual master. I think we're all being called to our highest selves these days.

MM: So tell me, the second part of that question is, did this change your relationship to your daughter writing, or to the experience of losing your daughter, writing this down finally?

MS: Yeah, it did. When Jenny died, I actually wrote her eulogy and read it at her memorial service the week after she died, which seems to me now like I can't even believe that I did that but I was in that altered state that we often get into in trauma. But it was, even reading it now, it's like spot on. It's the last line of her eulogy, it was, "I will write your story." So this is a promise I made to Jenny. And I had to do it eventually. Did it change our relationship? Yes. I see something in that... in having... I feel like crying as I'm saying this... in having delivered my vow, it was, and is, very meaningful to me. And Jenny has, little by little over the years, infiltrated my psyche, my spirit in such a way that I feel she's part of everything I do.

You know, I do a lot of speaking and teaching, and I always call on Jenny like I call on the ancestors, like I call on the divine mother, like I call on the gurus and the masters, and the angels to be with me. She's part of my spirit team in a very real way, and Jenny died on the very day that my very first book came out. That was my translation of *Dark Night of the Soul*. And at the same time I was turning inward to grieve the death of my child, I was being called outward to the world to speak and teach, and that tension was very... it was ok... it was actually fine... but it was noticeable.

And I felt from the very beginning that Jenny was part of my work in the world... that she was a resource and somehow guiding my steps. And I've felt that more and more as the years go by. I would give it all up for one more minute to have her with me... tell her I love her and to just be with her again. But since that's not possible, I am grateful for the way in which she is with me. I think also the writing, I mean, you experience the trauma all over again when you write, but I know you know this, Mark. And so it was pretty intense to go through the writing process but I've stayed with it and I've tried to engage in as much self-care as I could along the way. You know, warm baths, hikes in the mountains and good food and good sex, and all the things that nourish and feed my body, mind and soul. You know, in as conscious a way as I could as I went. I have an incredibly supportive community family, and I felt like in some ways we were all writing this book together.

MM: Tell me, when someone comes to you in deep grief, that doesn't seem to be shifting, folks come to me often and say, "I'm just stuck in this place." "I'm stuck." What do you say to them? What kind of advice do you give?

MS: Well, the first thing I do is what I don't do, and that is try to change anybody's experience. And so, I'm not a psychologist. I did do a grief counseling training program, a graduate program, so I have training but I'm not a psychotherapist. My task is to companion people's hearts because that is all I wanted when I experienced my most difficult loss. I just wanted somebody to bear witness to my pain. And so that's what I do

with people. I don't try to help them shift. I do invite them to just live in the fire with me. I say, "I'm here with you, I'm going to sit in it right here with you." And I do. I don't shield myself from their pain. I just try to hold a loving space for them to feel it. And almost a hundred percent of the time, shifting happens as a result of just having someone bear witness to our pain.

MM: So true. And beautifully said too. Let me ask you one last question, and it's about mysticism and everyday life. Your life, your career, your work, your path has been so deeply cultivated by your work with the mystics of all traditions. Mysticism has kind of a bad rep in our culture. A lot of intelligent, well-informed people think it is the same as magic. You say mystic and they think you're talking about wizardry and tricks. So how can we ground our sense of what mysticism is in everyday life? How can folks wake themselves up to this innate capacity without going into woo-woo land?

MS: Right. Yes, as you might have gathered by now, I'm not the slightest bit interested in woo-woo. So let's start with the basic working definition of mysticism.

Mysticism is about having a direct encounter with the divine, with the sacred, with the mystery, as opposed to some kind of mediated experience through prescribed prayers or rituals. It's about meeting the holy with our own beings, and it doesn't mean that we're having some kind of encounter like Moses on the mountaintop with the faith of God. It means having a sense of direct experience of the sacred. It may be hiking, it may be cooking, it may be witnessing the birth of a baby or the death of a loved one when that sense of the sacred breaks through and touches us directly.

And so the way that I know to cultivate that experience, which is partly grace and just comes whether we like it or not, regardless of what we deserve, but there is a sort of cultivation of the ground that can happen. And for me the key practice is contemplative practice. Some kind of meditation practice because silent sitting teaches us to not believe everything we think, and therefore, to be kind to what is. So that we then become available to the breaking through, as the Christian mystics say, of the divine into our own souls, by virtue of just having been still and silent for a few minutes on a regular basis, so that the ground of our being becomes kind of tilled, and the willingness to not know seems to help create the conditions for this sacred encounter, this transformational encounter. And I don't, as you pointed out, limit that to any one religious tradition. I'll take the god of love wherever I can find her. In Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Native American traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, everywhere.

MM: Well, you're really a treasure, Mirabai. There's nobody like you teaching and writing, and I just want to thank you so much for taking the time to visit The Seekers Forum, and such good luck with the book.

MS: Thank you so much, Mark. Be well everyone.