

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Seymour: An Introduction An Interview with Seymour Bernstein

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum podcast series, I'm Mark Matousek.

I spoke to Seymour Bernstein who is the subject of a new documentary by the actor, Ethan Hawke, a documentary called Seymour: An Introduction. I spoke to Seymour about his long-time career as a mentor, teacher and musical prodigy. Seymour is now 88 years old and he is a font of artistic passion and wisdom whose philosophy of teaching and music may be summed up in a single sentence. He says, "The real essence of who we are resides in our talent, whatever that is." By talent, he doesn't necessarily mean artistic talent. Our talent is the passion, the genius, the originality that we bring to our lives. That's why I wanted to speak to him during the month when we're talking about the negativity bias and this voice that's inside us that tells us life is impossible, that we can't do it, that we're not equal to what is given to us in our own existence. Seymour is the author of two previous books, With Your Own Hands as well as Twenty Lessons in Keyboard Choreography, and his most recent book, Play Life More Beautifully, which is co-authored with the spiritual scholar and activist, Andrew Harvey. As eagle-eyed as he is eloquent, Seymour spoke to me about how to locate our essential talent, why life without discipline leads nowhere, and why he doesn't believe in God. ~ Mark

MM: Welcome Seymour Bernstein, it's so great to have you here. I want to talk to you about "Playing Life More Beautifully," which is your new book with Andrew Harvey, which also seems to be your mantra in life: learning to play more beautifully. I'd like to start with one quote that I was so moved by. You said, "I remember I became aware when practice went well, everything in life seemed harmonized. When it didn't, I was out of sorts." And then you said, "The real essence of who we are resides in our talent, whatever that talent is." Can you talk about the importance of discovering that talent, whether or not we're musicians?

SB: Well, let's replace the word *talent* with *passion*. I believe that everyone has some sort of passion, everyone has some deep interest in something. It occurs to me that the very essence, that deep interest, that passion, is the essence of who that person is. In short, we're all searching for our identity. Some people have an identity crisis, as you know, and I think that when we decide and determine who we really are, what is the real essence that determines our personality, our desires, our aspirations, then we will find that in whatever talent we have.

MM: And that talent doesn't need to be artistic, obviously. It can be the talent for mothering, the talent to be a community organizer, is that right?

SB: Exactly right, as you say. It could be gardening, it could be cooking, as long as you have passion for something. The reason why I speak about that very often with my friends and my pupils is that from the moment we're born, we're dependent on forces outside of us. For example, if we didn't have a mother, we wouldn't be able to survive. As we get older, if we didn't have teachers, we wouldn't learn how to write, or read, et cetera. Throughout our lives we seek gurus, teachers, forces that help us to improve ourselves, we're seeking all the time outside ourselves, and in a religious sense, we also seek something, a spirit that is apart from us. I maintain, and it is only my thought, that

all life forces have within themselves a spiritual reservoir. As a matter of fact, many religions do claim that God is within. So there is something within all of us that can give us many answers if we tap into it. And, when we're thinking that our talent may actually define who we are, then we are probing something within us and not seeking for answers all the time outside of us.

MM: That's so beautifully said. And yet, teachers – you're one of the great teachers – teachers and mentors play such an important part in discovering and cultivating that talent sometimes.

SB: We couldn't do it without our teachers, isn't that right?

MM: Yes.

SB: But Mark, when you think of the word education, it comes from the Latin, *educare* which means to “lead out.” So, in a sense, the best teachers are aware of that special essence within their pupil that needs to be led out, and that's what good teaching really does. It doesn't implant anything, but rather, leads it out of the student. Many of my pupils, for example, when I'm teaching them music and I show them a certain interpretive attitude, they all say the same thing: *You know that's right, I feel exactly the same thing.* I just made them aware of what I just said, that essence is within them and I led it out of them.

MM: You mirror it back to them.

SB: In a sense, that's a wonderful way to put it.

MM: Something that you say about music teachers also struck me. You say that the most important thing that music teachers can do for their pupils is to inspire and encourage an emotional response, not just for music, but more importantly, for all aspects of life.

SB: Exactly!

MM: Talk to me, how does music sensitize emotion and prepare us for life?

SB: Well, you see, no one really knows what music is. Scientists, philosophers, musicologists, they all put their heads together to try to define this amazing language and there is nothing really succinct about that definition, but in my opinion, it's fair to say that music is the language of feeling and somehow, the great composers, by placing tones one after the other and in a certain order, vertically and horizontally, those tones define all human emotion.

MM: And by becoming sensitive to music, we become sensitive to those emotions.

SB: Exactly. The music ought to stir up the very emotion that is within the music, whatever the student is practicing. That music should stir up the same emotion that is

within the music. That's why I said the most important thing that teachers can do for their pupil is to encourage this emotional response, make them aware that the music is triggering a specific feeling within them. As I go through life, and it's been many years you know, on April 24th I will be 89, that's living a long time.

SB: You said "Wow." (Seymour chuckles) That's living a long time.

I know this, that all too many people that I meet, I would call them emotionally bankrupt, they don't seem to respond emotionally to certain situations and stimuli. Certainly you can't be a serious music student unless your emotional world is alive. The ancient Greeks knew this and that's why music was one of four subjects without which they thought humans could not develop properly.

MM: And one way that music teaches us to understand our lives has to do with dissonance and resolution, if I can just read one more thing that you say.

You say, "We wouldn't know the meaning of the resolution without the dissonance."

SB: There you go.

MM: Can you apply that to resilience and how we approach failure and risk in our lives?

SB: Mark, you know, you're really terrific! (They both laugh) I have to interrupt the interview by throwing the light on you. You are very perceptive. That's exactly right, what you just said. In life we have conquests and disappointments, and they are all part of our development. Sometimes, it's more difficult to weather huge success. Of course, we all know what a pain it is to suffer rejection, but gains can also create problems. I'll give you an example.

When I made my New York debut, in Town Hall, I was in my twenties. There were about six newspapers that came out at that time and they all had rave reviews. Mark, I want to tell you that three years later when I wanted to give a second concert I suffered a nervousness because I thought, *how am I going to top that first debut?* What will happen if the reviews weren't as good?

So that's how life goes. It goes positive, negative. Tension, relaxation, et cetera. We have to weather both.

MM: Absolutely. It's so interesting to think that success can breed it's own kind of anxiety that can sometimes be more counterproductive than failure, and sometimes failure pushes us forward.

SB: Exactly what you said. And when you make a huge success, then you say: how can I climb higher than that? You know, the famous pianist, Vladimir Horowitz, he was declared the greatest pianist in the world. Every time he walked out on the stage, he sounded almost impossible to play that role. Being the greatest alive, it finally broke him

down, he had to retire for twelve years and take stock of what was going on. And he survived and survived very nobly and ended playing better than he had ever played.

MM: Seymour, I'd like to ask you about discipline. Discipline is a word that a lot of folks have trouble with. You say without craft there can be no artistry. How can we reframe our relationship to discipline so that it becomes something that comes out of love rather than self-punishment?

SB: Well, maybe it's something even more than love. Discipline is more than love. Again, quite recently, I came to the conclusion that all of life is a preparation for getting older. I came to that conclusion because of my age. So, at my age, I look back at my life. I take stock and I say to myself, *Did you give life the best fight that you knew how? Did you really practice as hard as you could? Did you accept challenges and try your best to meet them?* And, do you have any regrets? Well, you know, I'm one of these fortunate people. I don't have any regrets, I really did give life the best fight I knew how. I impregnate this into my people, I tell them if they are lax in practicing for their lessons, I'm very quick to tell them: You just take stock now, you shouldn't be thinking about getting old or anything like that, but try to project into the future and your age, or maybe even a little younger, and you're going to take stock: *Did I do the best that I could?* You don't want to have any regrets. I think that you ought to just realize what the future holds for you and do the best job that you know how.

MM: Beautiful. I'd like to talk to you about the integration of the artist and the world. You've had such a refined life in a certain kind of way. You say in the film, that the contrast between the unbelievable attainment of art and the unpredictability of the social world is so great, that it can make an artist neurotic, that the contrast can make an artist neurotic. How does the artist integrate that refinement and that sensitivity with being in the world?

SB: Artists have a difficult time because they don't understand what being an artist entails, they're doing it for the wrong reasons. Of course all serious artists begin by devoting their lives to a passion because they love it. I know, for example, I couldn't live without music. Music isn't actually a way of life for me, it IS my life. Music is my life. So now, when I practice, what I'm doing is integrating my emotional, my intellectual and my physical worlds. If artists knew that they were doing that and if they were conscious of it, when they achieved an integration of those three areas through their art, they would direct that integration into their social world. As an example, when musicians trained themselves to listen to what is coming out of their instrument so that they are sure that what is coming out of the instrument matches what their inner world is experiencing, that teaches them to listen to people speaking in a very intense and involved fashion.

MM: Hmm.

SB: You see, there is a correlation there. So, I think that artists get into trouble and they get neurotic because they don't carry their hard earned discipline from their art into the social world. In fact, they try to do just the opposite. They try only to bring the social

world into their art. I don't really think that works because the social world is very unpredictable, but our art is very predictable.

MM: And that's what gives it depth, is that right?

SB: Exactly. That's what gives the art depth and yields depth to the person.

MM: You talk about the innocence of children, that we can learn from the innocence of children which reminded me of the biblical line, the child shall become father to the man. What is it we can learn from the child within ourselves, Seymour, that we're trained to forget as adults?

SB: Yes, absolutely what you said.

MM: What are the childlike qualities that can benefit us?

SB: Spontaneity without thought, that's the major thing. You know, children respond without thought. They're not even aware of their response, they just exude a particular response to stimuli and events. You know, a child will walk into a room that is unusually decorated and say, "Oh mommy, look at that, isn't this gorgeous?" And sometimes, the mother will say, "Now, behave yourself." Some parents, some grownups don't like to have people express themselves, they think there is something a little rude about that. I know in some cases that's a religious no-no to be over emotional about anything other than God. So you see, this is a very complicated area.

MM: Yes, it is. The word enthusiasm comes from the Greek for, "filled with God" so it's sort of ironic.

SB: By the way, do you know that I don't believe in God?

MM: So tell me about that.

SB: Oh boy, do I have one to tell you about that. This is so interesting. When there was a discussion about writing the book with Andrew, I got very concerned because this is very religious press and I discovered that Andrew felt exactly as I did. This is how we feel, if I might try to explain. It's difficult to put into words, but I'm going to try.

You see when I contemplate the life force itself, all the various life forms that are on earth and in space, when I contemplate a universe that is still expanding and no one has ever contemplated or found the end to it, (it's still expanding); when I contemplate those two things, I have to fall to my knees in awe and reverence. I say to myself, "Something is responsible for this." Now. Can I conclude what or who is responsible for all of this? The first thing that comes to mind, is that to name it is sheer arrogance. It can't have a name. It's so awe-inspiring, so spiritual, so amazing, so everything that will trigger a sense of awe, so for me, it can't be named. So the closest I've come to naming it is to consider, that in all life forces, there is a spiritual reservoir. In other words, the universe

which is the macrocosm is within us in the form of a microcosm which I call the spiritual reservoir. And Andrew feels very much the same. I was so interested to know that he felt that way.

MM: It reminds me of what you said in the movie: “I never dreamt that with my two hands I could touch the sky.”

SB: Oh boy, yes.

MM: How beautiful is that and it connects with what you were just saying.

SB: Well, do you know where that comes from? Well, Mark, it is a very, very dramatic story. One of my dearest friends that passed away some years ago was Flora Levin, she was a famous classicist and her expertise was ancient Greek music. She has written books and has been noted in books by other classicists, she was a very famous woman and she was my pupil. You can imagine her expertise with ancient Greek music. I learned a lot from her. As a matter of fact, she was the one who really taught me how to write. She helped me write my book, “With Your Own Two Hands,” that’s the name of it.

I was teaching one day and she interrupted my teaching with a phone call.

And she said, “Did I ever call you when you were teaching?”

I said, “No.”

She said, “Well, your book is in the printer, it’s about to be printed. You have to call your editor of Macmillan and tell them to stop the printing immediately.”

I said, “Flora, what are you talking about?”

She continued, “Seymour, there’s no time to waste. Just do what I say.”

Well, she was so urgent, I stopped teaching, I called the editor and they stopped the press. Then, I spoke with Flora on the phone later and this is what she told me.

She said, “Do you know who Sappho was? She was a woman poet and she was probably one of the greatest poets that ever lived and there were very few poems extant from her. And in my research, I just translated one of her poems for the first time. And here’s the translation: *I never dreamt that with my own two hands I could touch the sky.*”

SB: Well, my book is titled, “With Your Own Two Hands.” When she saw that she almost fainted, she couldn’t believe it. I burst into tears, you know, when she told me this. They stopped the press, and on the front piece of my book, the first page, that Sappho poem appears.

MM: Hmm. Perfect.

SB: And you know, Ethan, read everything that I ever wrote and how he discovered that page is just amazing to me. Can you picture this? I'm watching the movie in a private showing that Ethan arranged and at the end of the movie I speak that poem. Can you picture how I felt? I just burst into tears.

MM: It's extraordinary. It's a wonderful movie, congratulations on the movie itself. It's going to help so many people and inspire so many.

SB: Don't you think Ethan created a masterpiece?

MM: I think it's a beautiful, beautiful movie. I think you're the masterpiece – I think it's a really good movie. (They both laugh)

SB: Well, I know it's about me, but everything depends upon the editing of the movie. Ethan edited it in a certain way so that the piano becomes a metaphor for life.

MM: Exactly. Well, Seymour, I don't want to keep you. I know that you have another call after mine, but I thank you so much for talking to me and I really hope to meet you in person sometime.

SB: Mark, I have to congratulate you. You are really terrific.

MM: Thank you so much, sir, I'll talk to you again.