

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Marrow: An Interview with Elizabeth Lesser. From the September Program, Playing with Power

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Elizabeth Lesser is a bestselling author and the cofounder of Omega Institute, the renowned conference and retreat center located in Rhinebeck, New York. Elizabeth's first book, The Seeker's Guide, chronicles her years at Omega and distills lessons learned into a potent guide for growth and healing. Her New York Times bestselling book, Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow (Random House), has sold more than 300,000 copies and has been translated into 20 languages. Her latest book, Marrow: A Love Story (HarperCollins / September 2016), is a memoir about Elizabeth and her younger sister, Maggie, and the process they went through when Elizabeth was the donor for Maggie's bone marrow transplant.

MM: Welcome, Elizabeth Lesser. It's always such a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you for getting together to discuss *Marrow*.

EL: Oh, you're welcome. Thanks for having me.

MM: I love this book and I love it for a lot of different reasons. It's a love story, it's a survivor's story, and it's also a spiritual memoir, which is a hard thing to pull off in one book. So, let's start with love. This experience with your sister obviously was a deep initiation for you. You write, "Love is a mess, love is a dance, love is a miracle, love is also stronger than death but I'm only learning that now." Can you tell me what you mean by saying that love is stronger than death?

EL: Well, spoiler alert. I'll give away what I give away at the beginning of the book anyway so it's really okay. But my sister, after a long process the two of us go through when I'm her bone marrow donor, at the end, after a couple of years, she dies. We had worked so beautifully, deeply, difficultly, on changing our relationship from a kind of typical sibling relationship where you, oh, just kind of bumble along, sometimes getting along, sometimes not. We worked as hard as we could to rediscover each other in a deeper place, and we fell in love. Not that we hadn't loved each other before but there was a lot of unspoken stuff, as most siblings have, as most people have. So we tried to make that conscious. We were doing it because of this maybe, mashugana idea I had that if we could figure out how to clean up our own relationship, maybe we could teach our cells, my cells, before they went into her bloodstream in the marrow transplant, her cells once mine got in there, maybe we could teach them to get along too, and make the transplant work better. So, it did for a while and it gave her a wonderful year. I don't know if I ever loved anyone as purely as we ended up loving each other. Now that she died, I still feel nurtured by that love. I feel her in me, around me, mysteriously somewhere. So that's what I mean by love is forever.

MM: That's beautiful. You talk about there being a kind of a braid of love, the love of Maggie, the love of yourself, but also the love of amor fati. Can you just talk a little bit about what you mean by amor fati and how it played out in the story with Maggie?

EL: Amor fati is Latin for love of fate. I remember reading that a long time ago in a philosophy class in college from Nietzsche. Nietzsche writes about being able to say yes to your fate. Not just that attitude of like "life's a bitch and then you die," or the kind of dry Buddhist equanimity

– you know – just accepting what comes and goes – but more like this passionate yes toward the whole mess of life. Loving it, even the bad parts because on some level you get that even the most sucky parts of your life add up to something meaningful and beautiful. I remember hearing that phrase in college and thinking “that’s absolutely ridiculous and impossible, and who could love some of this stuff that happens? No thank you.” But I have as I’ve bumbled along in life, come to see that it’s possible. Maybe not all the time but just even to hold it out as a possibility. Holding it up there gives me a lot of space around the times when I’m suffering to understand that I may not see it then but it’s a piece of something. It has its beautiful opposite, so if it’s extreme suffering, it is part of a tapestry and its beautiful opposite – bliss and happiness – is coming to meet it somewhere. And that’s what amor fati is to me. Loving fate because its beyond my understanding why anything happens. So I might as well not just tolerate it but love it – like meet it with a lot of energy and passion.

MM: You don’t necessarily feel happy when you’re experiencing amor fati, it’s not that kind of emotional happiness I don’t think.

EL: I don’t either.

MM: Is it possible to have amor fati when you’re feeling lousy?

EL: Well it is for me. Happiness and amor fati are like from two different [12:33 recording blank] if you ask me. They’re like not really the same thing. You know, very melancholy people are often... melancholia to me is the capacity to feel deeply. So, to love your fate means you’re also gonna have a heart that’s touched by sadness and grief, and it really to me is more about an open heart as opposed to a happy heart. And if you stay open, you’re going to feel everything. But you can’t pick and choose. To me the emotional life isn’t something that you can be choosy about. You stay open and you’re going to feel everything. And I chose openness because it’s the only way I get to feel the beauty and the joy. But the cousins of those emotions, sadness and fear and depression, they come along in the bargain.

MM: Right. That leads to my next question. You talk about the fear of getting emotionally naked with Maggie. You’re much more afraid of that, it seems, then you are of the stem cell transplant. Can you talk about the process of dropping life-long stories with a sibling, let’s say. What advice would you give to people who are so mired in their own history that they can’t really see each other as human beings?

EL: Right. I feel very tentative in giving one-size-fits-all advice about this and I’ve learned this the hard way. I seem to learn everything the hard way. As a writer, I tend to write about things that I’m chewing on myself. So, as I was writing this book and one of the main thesis’s in it is that we all have the capacity to err in the direction of connection, is what I say in the book. That at all moments with the loved ones in our life, even people who we are having trouble with, we can chose to connect as opposed to run away or attack. So I started trying out this err in the direction of connection with everyone.

MM: You started trying it out with other relationships?

EL: Yeah. And like some people don't want to play with you. Some people, no matter how gentle and brilliant your articulation is, or sneaky or...some people just do not want to find intimacy. They are too shut down, too scared, too angry, too bitter. And so I tend to always try... well to take it as my own fault, or my own responsibility... I'll just try a little harder. But I have learned now, solidly enough, that you're only going to achieve that kind of connection and putting down the stories and myths and walking into a field of more truth and more intimacy, with someone who wants to try it out also. You can't make someone chose healing and intimacy.

So I imagine as I go out into the world with this book, people are going to say, "Well, my brother hasn't talked to me for ten years, and he's really angry at me at something I did, and I tried and he won't talk to me." And that truly may be the case in many people's relationships. But I stand by what I say in the book, which is most people, I feel, are just waiting to be invited. We don't know how to break the gridlocks in our relational lives. If one person takes the courageous step to say something as simple as "it seems we could have a better friendship, I don't know what's standing between us. Would you like to check it out with me? No big deal, but what do you think?" I think most people would jump at that chance, and we just don't do it. None of us are all that skilled or courageous at doing it so part of why I wrote the book is an invitation to people to be the one, the first one, to jump into the water.

And that's what I did with my sister, and granted it was a life and death situation with us, and it gave us a lot more courage to do so. But still, it was difficult to honestly tell her the ways in which she had hurt me as a kid and a teenager, and as a grown-up, and vice versa for me to hear her point of view, and her story. But as we told each other the truth of our stories, really what came out of it most of the time was, "I didn't know you felt that way. Why didn't you just tell me then? I thought x, y and z." There was so many misunderstandings and assumptions that had we cleared them up years ago, it would have been a different story.

MM: You used the word "soul" a lot in the book. The soul-self, and this is what happens when you put your soul in charge of your life. What do you mean by "soul?"

EL: Well, "soul" is really the only word in the English language that I have found that indicates there's more to who we are than our daily striving, scared, ego-centric self. And I'm not saying an ego-centric self is a bad self. You know, we need a certain amount of striving and aggression and self-regard to exist and thrive, but that striving-self obscures something purer, kinder, more trusting and more connected to the deep truth of the universe than our puny brains can figure out. So it's that seed-self, that seed within us that grew into who we are and has the potential always to grow, and know, and learn, and blossom. So it's there, it's hidden and really, to me, when you said I wrote a spiritual memoir, to me the spiritual path is that great journey of uncovering what we were born with and what we will leave with.

MM: And is that same as the marrow of the self?

EL: Yes. In my terminology. I used it as a metaphor because when I offered my sister the marrow of my bones to keep her alive, and then we went on this search together to offer each other our truths, both of those journeys felt very similar to me. Digging in the deepest part of my

bones to give a gift of life to my sister, and digging in the deepest, purest part of ourselves to really fall in love.

MM: You write about ADD. I like what you say about authenticity and that so much of writing this book for you was exploring... bringing authenticity into relationship, and how can you do that. Can you give some sort of general reasons for this ADD, this authenticity deficit disorder that you talk about, in our culture? Just a few ideas of why that is.

EL: Well of course I made up that term. Authenticity deficit disorder. But I experience it all the time in myself and others and in the culture, as you say. You know the great poet, Rumi, talked about this in the Twelfth Century, so it's nothing new to humans. It's not that our culture is so very inauthentic. We have our own ways of hiding the authentic self but it's been going on a long time. Rumi talks about the open secret, this secret we all hide from each other. We walk around pretending that we've got it all together, we're really smart, we're cool, "I'm cool," and "I don't need you," and "my life is so great." You really see it on Facebook now and social media. You know, everybody's vacation is better than everybody else's and we spend a lot of time hiding our vulnerable, confused, befuddled, stumbling self from each other.

Like we wake up and like, "Oh my god, how am I gonna get through this day?" And, "What is going on here?" and, "Who am I?" and "Who are they?" and everyone is experiencing this.

And yet, we try on all these artifices to appear other ways. And it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more we hide from each other, the more we hide from our self, and so we go around not really knowing what we want, what we love, what we need, who we want to be with, where we want to live, always looking out for what the other person is doing. And the authentic self is the one that attempts to break that cycle of almost embarrassment to being our self, and attending to who we really are. And then being who we really are with other people, as an invitation to them to be who they really are with us.

And it's so simple on the one hand, and very difficult for all of us to do – to be who we are in all of our strengths. For some people it's harder to be their strong, capable self in front of other people. They're afraid of being too powerful. Other people, they're afraid of being vulnerable and feeling too much.

MM: Right. Right. Let's talk a little bit about hope. You know, hope is obviously a two-edged sword, and you give the Greek myth about hope being left behind as the thing we can hold onto. There's another wonderful allegory of hope of a girl wearing a blindfold, playing a harp that only has one string, which I think is really beautiful. Tell me, how do you hold hope in your own life?

EL: Well, yes, it is a two-edged sword. One side is a form of denial. You know the sort of Pollyanna, rosy-colored glasses where you just don't look at the devastating side of life, and that can lead to a naiveté that gets you hurt. It can also lead to apathy in a world that really needs people to be awake and to help and to demonstrate and be a passionate activist for a better way. So if you just remain in this sort of fuzzy, hopeful, everything's gonna be okay way of looking at the world - an excess of that is not – I don't recommend it.

But on the other hand, people who only see the despairing, grievous side of life, who see no path toward, you know, that the arc of history is not bending toward goodness and salvation, you know they just see it as we're just going to hell in a hand basket and it's always been that way, and it's always gonna be that way – that's very enervating to me. To live like that also strips me of a desire to do anything good for the world because if it's hopeless, why do anything?

So it's a real balancing act of – really this is where amor fati comes back in – the idea of loving what's going on. Like a tenderness toward humanity and our shared life. Feeling tender toward it as opposed to hiding in either despair or too much hope, but just being tender. And that's a form of hope to me, it's a form of faith that I can stay open to all of this and be an agent of good.

MM: You took the words out of my mouth. I was just going to say, it sounds like faith and it sounds like what you mean when you talk about trusting the mystery. Is that right?

EL: Yeah. Yeah.

MM: Okay, I'd like to talk about the book as a survivor memoir for a moment. You know, there's this ambiguous good fortune in being a survivor. A lot of us have felt it – the paradox of the arrow hits the guy next to you and you're still standing. Can you talk a little bit about the paradoxical side of survival?

EL: Yeah. Well I assume by that you mean that my sister got sick and died and I didn't? Is that what you mean?

MM: Yes.

EL: One of the real gifts of being in honest conversation with my sister throughout her illness and spending a whole lot of time with her was I got to see how it was... it would be a huge disservice to her if I walked around with guilt and shame for being a survivor. That would make her angry and upset if people tiptoed around her and felt unable to be their full-blooded, healthy selves around her. She did not want that. She didn't want her kids to feel the guilt of being survivors, she didn't want me or her mate – she wanted us to live and to live fully.

Now she was someone who lived fully when she lived – when she was able – and she wanted us to do that. And whenever I feel survivor guilt come up, I feel her wagging her finger at me. You know, like, "Don't do that in my name." And that's what helps me not to be like that. She really did not want that and I think most people don't. Of course, you know ill people who suffer from all sorts of traumas and tragedies probably feel jealous and angry that they got the rough end of the deal but they don't want the people they leave behind to suffer in their name.

MM: And that's a deep expression of love.

EL: Hm mm. Definitely.

MM: Just to ask you a couple of questions about the book as spiritual memoir. You know you and Maggie were each other's guru, really, and really woke one another up in different ways. Can tell me, what did you learn from her? She was agnostic, if not atheist. What did you learn from her about god?

EL: Well I certainly learned that there are many ways to “god” [put the word in quotes] because even though she was agnostic and had like an allergic reaction to religion to anything that struck her as “woo-woo,” which about 80% of what I did with my life struck her as “woo-woo,” um even so, she had a deep hunger for it. When it came to the time when she really needed to lean on me, she was so grateful that I had some faith and some sense of the divine and of the eternal. She needed that from me. And even though she resisted it. And I was surprised to find that because she’d been so clear about judging anyone who was involved with spirituality or religion as being kind of dim-witted. There was a big part of her that when the rubber hit the road, she really was grateful that I had devoted my life to the big questions. Now she had devoted her life to some awesome things too that I learned from her and was so grateful – her deep engagement with the earth and with art and service. She was a nurse practitioner who served the rural poor in Vermont and she did it with such guts and kindness. So, yeah, I learned how to live in this world from her, and she learned that there was another world that she was glad I was living in. I’ve never put that into words so thank you.

MM: That’s so beautiful. That’s so beautiful. Just one last question. Can you talk to me a little bit about what you mean by “stop waiting” as being one of your major mantras? What do you mean by “stop waiting?”

EL: Well I got that from the teacher, Eckhart Tolle. I was at a retreat once at Omega that he was leading. Someone in the audience asked a question. You know how those questions in the audience often are the teaching for the whole time. And this guy said to him, “Is there a practice you would recommend when you’re waiting,” like you know at a stop light or a line and you’re really impatient. Is there a practice? And Eckhart Tolle in his inimitable very few words said: “There’s no such thing as waiting.”

Some people spend their whole life waiting for life to start. And what he meant by “there’s no such thing as waiting,” is if you’re really appreciating whatever is happening in this moment, like even just breathing, and you’re really tasting that breathing, and exhaling fully and feeling your whole body when you do, there’s no such thing as waiting because you’re just tasting the deliciousness of that moment. Easier said than done. You know, if you’re in the dentist chair or something – but I – on the purest level of spiritual wisdom, I totally agree with him. There’s no such thing as waiting for the next moment. There’s just being in this one. I mean that’s about as spirituality 101 as you can get but it serves me greatly all the time when I feel impatient or anxious. You know, impatient for the next moment to come or anxious about the next moment. To stop waiting for anything to happen and just to be in what’s happening.

MM: Oh Elizabeth, thank you so much. That was a beautiful interview.

EL: Oh, you’re welcome. I really thank you for that question about Maggie, what did she teach me – that was really something. It’s really interesting the way you write a whole book and afterwards you realize, “Whoops, I forgot to write what it was really about.”

MM: Well, you hardly did that! Thanks, this is great. Thank you.