

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Dropping the Struggle: An Interview with Roger Housden

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Roger Housden is the author of twenty books on poetry, art, and travel including the bestselling Ten Poems series which started in 2001 with *Ten Poems to Change Your Life*. His next book, due to be published by Sounds True in March 2014, is called *Keeping the Faith Without a Religion*. Roger emigrated to the United States from England in 1998 and now lives in Marin County, California.

MM: Welcome, Roger Housden. It's always so great to talk with you. Thank you for joining The Seekers Forum today.

RH: Great pleasure, Mark. I'm looking forward to speaking with you.

MM: Thanks. I love your new book, *Dropping the Struggle*.

I want to start with the struggle to be special. You talk about losing this sense of performance and needing to stand out in that kind of meritocratic way that we're taught to do in this culture.

How can we begin to dismantle this armor of specialness, Roger, that we're raised to carry with us?

RH: What a great question. I'm still working on it, Mark. It's a lifelong process, isn't it?

Because we do this natural wish and impetus to feel oneself to be an individual, and to be an individual in some way is to be different to everyone else, not just different but in some way perhaps standing out more than anyone else. Our culture really supports that whole idea, doesn't it? The American culture especially, and Western culture in general, urges us to not only become the best that we can be but also really win against all the competition if possible.

Of course, we do want to be the best that we can be. That's completely natural and to be commended, of course.

But what happens, I think, is that we, the ego that is, our familiar sense of self really is predicated on fear, the fear that we might not make it, that we might not get where we want to go, actually the fear deep down that we really have nothing to give or nothing to offer and somewhere I think in all of us there is a grain of that at least. I think it's because the ego itself has had some justifiable anxiety about its substantiality, about its existence, in fact.

This is true because when we actually look, when we turn our gaze around from the outside to the inside and we look, then it becomes not so easy to actually locate this familiar sense of self that we carry around with us.

So that fear is understandable and to overcome that fear, often, I think, we need to feel special in some way by doing something special in some way.

I think the answer to your question in brief is self-enquiry, the beginning of the willingness to look at one's motives from moment to moment, not making oneself wrong, but simply being willing to notice where a particular movement or intention is coming from.

Is it coming out of fear or fear of loss or fear of failure, or is it coming out of a natural aspiration off of one's life, off of one's individuality to the good of the world in general?

I think that's the first step, being willing for a moment to be self-reflective and ask, "What is the truth of my intention, where does it come from?"

MM: If it comes from fear and desperation, then we're going to be reaching for what you call specialness, as opposed to wanting to express our individuality and our originality. That is not a struggle in itself? Am I understanding you correctly?

RH: Some of us have the good fortune, for example, of having a natural gift, whatever it may be, whether it's playing tennis or whether it's painting or writing.

The painter Renoir, the great French Impressionist painter, right at the end of his long life – eighty-eight I think when he died – just a few months before he died, he said to a friend who was with him, "I am just now learning to paint."

Renoir really did have a special gift. Of course, he did. But he carried it with a humility which really, I think this is true, for anyone who really goes deeply into really the field of life, the more we go into it, the more we realize there is to learn and that keeps us humble. It keeps us with a sense of proportion and I think that's what I mean by the word humble, not bowed head, but keeps us with a sense of proportion and I think that's what's important.

Of course, you're right. We are each of us special in the sense that nobody, absolutely no one, has the unique pattern of potentialities and gifts that you do or that anyone else does. In that sense, I think our life lies in the fulfillment of that. The more we enter our own gifts, the more we realize, the more we feel a sense of proportion.

MM: The next struggle that you talk about is the struggle for a perfect life which is connected to the struggle to be special.

Tell me, how can we make our lives better and aspire to learning and growth and expansion and liberation without bringing struggle into that process, would you say?

RH: First of all, I'd say that struggle does have a natural place in our life. I don't think we know anyone who hasn't at some time struggled in one way or another. And the fight or flight syndrome is someone's false struggle. So there is at times a place for that. But I think what happens is, the difficulty is that we often misplace that fight or flight reaction onto areas of life that it really is never successful in.

Struggle is never really going to be successful in issues that are existential or in the kind of things that concern the quality of our life, for example, meaning or purpose or love. These are things that actually come to us more and more as we let go of struggling to achieve them.

Seeing where struggle has its natural and proper place is one thing, but (we have to see when we are) transferring that tendency for struggle into areas such as meaning and purpose and love, and also the givens of life that we have as humans. For example, the fact that everything changes from day to day, from year to year, from decade to decade – our lives change, the people around us change, and circumstances change. And we can sometimes find ourselves struggling against that.

I think it's, again, this capacity to notice, to become aware of the givens of our existence, such as change, and to actually welcome those as just part of our human experience.

MM: So, you're not speaking against the desire or the effort toward self-improvement? It's about trying to attain some kind of perfection that's about holding onto our reputation, our image and things in a way that they won't change. Am I hearing you correctly?

RH: Precisely, yes, absolutely.

Of course, all of us want to, or most of us want to, again, do and be the best that we can be which does mean that we make effort. So, I think here there's a distinction we need to make between the notion of struggle and the notion of effort.

At times, for example, if we're trying always to get our ducks in a perfect row, the perfect house, the perfect relationship, the perfect job, it's likely that there's some kind of fear driving us that is actually not just the natural wish to improve. It's really in a sense the refusal to acknowledge that life, including ourselves – life is simply not perfect.

There's a wonderful poem. Can I read a couple of lines of that by Ellen Bass called *Relax*? She says in this poem *Relax*: Bad things are going to happen, no matter how many vitamins you take, how much Pilates, you'll lose your keys, your hair, and your memory. Your wallet will be stolen. You'll get fat, slip on the bathroom tiles in a foreign hotel and crack your hip.

So, bad things are going to happen. She's not saying don't take this medicine, she's not saying don't do Pilates. She's saying that's great to do and you'll at some time or another probably lose your keys, and more likely your hair and your memory.

So, it all goes together as part of the whole picture of what it is to be human, our beautiful imperfections.

MM: Wonderful.

You mentioned the struggle for meaning and that struggle in existential areas does us very little good and, yet, a lot of folks I know really are at a loss for purpose and meaning as they get older and see through so many of the illusions of youth and becoming somebody.

Is it possible to live without a sense of meaning and how would you define what a sense of meaning is?

RH: I think that's a great question.

Some atheists would say, or many perhaps, would say that that is indeed the purpose of their lives, to live without meaning, to have the courage to live without meaning. That is not what I am saying at all.

For me what I'm saying really comes out of my own experience. I certainly spent many years in my early life chasing all over the globe for meaning and purpose, and while I would feel like I'd find it for periods of time, it would fade away again, and I'd be running off somewhere else looking for it all over again. I had a classic case of what people call seeker's disease. But, that was all part of my journey.

But really, now, and for quite some time, meaning for me is like a secret that's revealing itself moment by moment, day by day.

When we're fully engaged in the present moment, whatever it is that we're doing, whether we're simply sitting watching the evening sky or whether we're playing tennis, whatever we may be doing, if we're fully in the moment that we're living now, have you noticed the question of meaning never arises?

MM: Um-hum.

RH: Because we feel fulfilled and when we feel fulfilled, that is inherently meaningful. And so for me, I've come to see that the way my life shows up is actually my purpose.

That is, if I want to know my purpose, look around, look around my life, because my unfolding life is actually my gift to the world. It may not look spectacular and probably won't, but nobody else has this precise life that I do. It's a gift no one else can offer. And, if I allow myself to experience, to fully feel the life that I'm in, not conceptually, but actually viscerally, to allow myself to be here in this present moment of the life that I have, then that is inherently meaningful.

Here's a practice then, it very often returns to this, the practice of the remembrance of the present moment, of being willing to actually be where one is, again, not conceptually, but in a felt way. For me, anyway, in my experience, that is the most inherently meaningful experience I can have.

MM: Beautiful.

And what about love? You write about dropping the struggle in love. How is it possible? What are some of the tools, practices, changes that people can make in relationship to drop that struggle separately and together.

RH: This again is a lifelong question, isn't it? Because fundamentally I think all of us in one form or another are looking for love or want love or want to feel love, as well as give love. I think there are so many ways we could come at this and approach this.

And again, really, this question of love begins and ends with oneself, the willingness to be kind and welcoming to one's own experience is a loving action towards oneself. Starting there, actually ending there, too, but starting there with a kind, warm embrace towards one's own experience, whatever that experience may be or feel like. It may be dark, it may be light, it may be joyous, it may be sorrowful, but it's your experience, therefore, your life. No one else is living it at this moment. As we have that kind of loving response and loving embrace towards our own life, our own experience, then life itself in terms of the outside world, begins to feel different. The love of someone else, of another, is more accessible or more possible if one lives already in a sense of loving embrace towards oneself because that extends out into the world.

I begin that chapter actually with speaking about myself where for quite some years I was single and there were, probably a couple of years ago this happened in particular, although it happened on a variety of occasions, I woke up one morning early and just felt the tenderness of my being alone, the bitter sweetness of it. It has many colors, being alone. I walked out into my living room and honestly I can just say that everything, everything, was pouring with life, everything in my room, the red sofa, the chairs with their patterns of roses, even the coffee table, actually, with its scattering of books, everything somehow was alive, alive with the presence of being.

In that moment, seeing the world through those eyes, I felt, I realized that I could never really be alone, that I really did belong on this earth, and I do belong on this earth, just actually in the way that an oak tree does.

I think that is the beginning point of love toward oneself. Then I don't think one can run out from there and try and chase love. I think that when we ourselves are open in that way, open to ourselves and our own experience, and, therefore, open to the world – when we are open, then the world can respond.

We all have had these serendipitous moments, these serendipitous meetings out of nowhere, the most unlikely things, ways of meeting, that can happen when we have this, especially anyway, when we have this quality of deep acceptance towards ourselves.

MM: So, it does begin as an inside job.

RH: It's an inside job, it is.

MM: Roger, when you talk about ending the struggle against time, what do you mean? What do you mean by the struggle against time and how can we start to drop that struggle and enter into a more timeless dimension?

RH: First of all, I think by realizing the timeless dimension that you so rightly point to or speak of is nowhere else other than here, nowhere else other than where we are. Time and the timeless dimension co-exist here, now in this very moment that we're living, the very moment that we're speaking here on this phone.

The sense of time is something that was brought home to me very strongly once in India when I was sitting in an ashram. There was this teacher, this extraordinary, very, very simple man. I was sitting there with a crowd of Indian people and I was the only westerner. He looked across at me and laughed and said, "Mr. Roger thinks he's going to England tomorrow, but he's not going anywhere. His body may move, but he does not move." And at the moment, at the time I was actually very absorbed in trying to get my tickets to leave the country, leave India.

At the time I didn't quite recognize what he meant, but he was pointing, I realized later, to the fact that there is a stillness in all of us that is really the essence of who we are, a stillness and also a silence that actually doesn't move, that doesn't actually go anywhere. And our task, my task really, is to experience that, while being in time, because, of course, we have to be on time every day for one thing or another.

How can we be on time and yet not in time at the same time?

One thing I do, a great example, is driving. When I'm driving – I live in California, there's a lot of driving entailed – I'm going somewhere and I'm usually going somewhere to be on time to meet someone so I'm engaged in time, necessarily so. And, yet, how can I in that moment of driving my car be aware of that which is not going anywhere?

What I do is bring my attention to my hands which are on the steering wheel, and with my awareness in the sensation of the hands on the steering wheel, the chatter in my mind begins to fall away and I'm simply there driving the car going where I need to go, on time and in time. But with my hands full of sensation, the awareness of them, I brought my attention into my body, and actually the body is the doorway to the timeless, in the sense the body is always where we are. It's always in the present moment. What's not often in the present moment is the thinking mind.

But when we bring the attention into the body, and I've used the two hands as an example, filling the two hands with sensation on the steering wheel, my breathing slows, I'm awake and alive, in the car being on time and, yet, there is a part of me that is really in that still point of the turning world.

I think the body is the doorway to that still point.

MM: So, once again, it's presence that dissolves the struggle.

RH: In every circumstance, really, doesn't it return to that? It does.

It's so simple and yet so ungraspable in a way.

MM: Of course.

RH: Yes.

MM: The next section is about struggling against change and I think you've already addressed that. That's what we've been talking about throughout the interview.

RH: Yeah.

MM: Just one last question. When you talk about ending the struggle, dropping the struggle to know, and the struggle for knowledge, how does that line up with the aspiration for wisdom and for gnosis?

RH: I would say that wisdom and knowledge are two different things. Knowledge is immensely powerful and immensely valuable and useful. Of course, it is. We live in an age of knowledge. After all, we have the great god, Google, that we can refer to at any time on absolutely any subject in the world, so we can acquire as much knowledge as we would like on any subject at all with a few taps on our keyboard. That's extremely valuable.

But, knowledge is not the same as wisdom, I would say. Wisdom really comes from that different dimension.

All the time we've been speaking of two different dimensions of being human, the everyday familiar sense of self who lives in time, for example, and that dimension in us which we've called presence, that is always here wherever we go and is silent and quiet.

It is from that region, I think, that knowing comes. Knowing is wordless really. It's a knowing of what needs to be done or what needs to be said or what needs to happen at any one given time. That is wisdom and wisdom does not come, although it can use knowledge, wisdom does not come from the accumulation of knowledge.

It really does come from resting in that presence, that stillness that we always are. It's the bringing together of both knowledge and wisdom I think that is part of our whole journey.

MM: Beautiful.

Thank you, Roger. This was a fantastic interview as always and I just wish you the best of luck with *Dropping the Struggle*. And, everyone, go out and get yourself a copy right away and give it to your friends. It's an important book. Roger is an amazing writer and a good friend of mine.

It's been wonderful to connect today.

RH: Mark, it's always, always a pleasure. Thank you so much for the invitation.

MM: Thank you. I'll talk to you soon.

RH: Bye-bye.