

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The State of Affairs: An Interview with Esther Perel

June 18, 2017



The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Hello. Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. I'm excited to welcome Esther Perel to The Seekers Forum this month. Esther is one of the most insightful and provocative voices on personal and professional relationships and the complex science behind human interaction. She is the best-selling author of Mating in Captivity, Unlocking Erotic Intelligence – which has been translated into 25 languages – and has also been featured in two TED Talks, which together have attracted some 10 million viewers. Esther's specialty is the paradoxical nature of human interaction in intimacy, which is why I wanted her to talk to us this month. Her new book is called The State of Affairs and examines the phenomenon of infidelities, not for any prurient reason, but infidelity as a doorway to deeper conversation about the places we are blocked, the places we feel we can't communicate with one another, and all of the reasons that people do stray in relationships that often have very little to do with sex itself. So it's a thrill to have Esther with us, and I hope you enjoy our conversation. Thanks a lot.

MM: Esther, I'd like to start with something that you say about affairs having a lot to teach us about relationships and eros in human nature. What does infidelity have to teach us about love and relationships in your opinion?

EP: Basically the story of infidelity, or adultery, or affairs – which is basically the parallel story that has accompanied marriage from its inception – encompasses the entire human drama, the dilemmas of love and desire, our longings, our yearnings, our aspirations, our transgressions. On the one hand, our rebellion; and on the other side our experience of rejection, of abandonment, of betrayal, of violation of trust, of loss, of being on the receiving end of duplicity, of lies, of jealousy, of possessiveness, of vengeance. I mean basically opera understood that. And Russian novelists understood that – French novelists too for that matter – that this one very complex multi-determined human experience really is a window into the crevasses of the human heart in more ways than we can even imagine. So, it's a lens for me because it encompasses so many aspects of our longings and our losses.

MM: What are some of the misconceptions about infidelity?

EP: I think one of the main misconceptions today – because modern infidelity is very different and very differently conceived than traditional infidelity – but in modern infidelity, which sits on top of the romantic ideal that you find “the one” and that if you have everything that you need at home, you absolutely have no reason to go looking elsewhere. Hence if you do, by definition an affair is a symptom of a flawed relationship. An affair is a symptom of a relationship gone awry. And if you don't apply the deficiency model to the relationship, then you apply the deficiency model to the person. The person who strays is selfish, immature, narcissistic, addicted, borderline, insecure attachment, you name it. And the person who is not straying is considered the committed partner, the mature partner, the stable partner, the non-selfish partner. So, one of the misconceptions is that it's a symptom theory. Second thing of the misconception is that it's a deficiency model. There must be something wrong, either in you or in your relationship, or this wouldn't happen. Third misconception is that the betrayal of infidelity sits on top of all over the other hierarchies of relational betrayals. Therefore, the person who exhibits infidelity is more troubled than the person who didn't stray as if that is the marker for

their relational quality. The next misconception is that affairs must be the deal-breaker, that they are forever beyond repair. Sixth, that nothing good can come out of it.

MM: Hm.

EP: Seven, that once you cheat, always a cheater.

MM: Hm. I'd like to stop right there. You talk about...

EP: (Laughs) There's a few of them already...

MM: You talk about the idea that nothing good can come of them. And you say in fact that some affairs inspire change that was sorely needed. Can you give an example of that with somebody you have worked with?

EP: I mean you know in many couples there has never been a conversation about sexuality. And there has never been a conversation about sexual boundaries. And there has never been a conversation about why there is constantly one giver and one taker and that basically an affair upsets the status quo. An affair highlights the score cards and its limitations. An affair yields conversations that have not happened and that should have happened in the beginning, but that people are afraid to have because if you have them in the beginning, what does that mean?

MM: Mmm.

EP: (What does that mean) if you already have to have them at the start? So, people don't have them. And affairs actually become the opportunity to discuss sexuality in particular, sexual boundaries and monogamy as a second, but every other aspect of the relationship too. I mean many times a couple will tell you after the affair is revealed that for the first time they are having conversations that they haven't had in years. They finally are talking, honestly, deeply as if, you know, now that there is nothing left to lose, they can finally go for it.

It's more often than not that people will – and you know, when I say “more often than not” in my office, that doesn't mean it's the same in the society at large – but very frequently people will come in and say, “We've had conversations like we haven't had in years.” One person has been giving himself or herself all kinds of permissions, while the other person was always home. Permissions even in life, you know, one person had activities; one person had outside friendships; one person traveled, while the other was manning the fort the whole time, you know, figuring that they needed to do this for the greater good. And then when this thing topples the balance, then it becomes, you know, “All the compromises that I needed to make or that I made that I am no longer so sure I want to make now, because when I had a good reason to do them, because I thought it was for us and for the good of us,” and all of that. “I was willing to do it. But now that you broke the contract, why should I continue to do something which I wasn't so keen on doing in the first place but agreed to do?” You know, for the team kind of thing. It's really that. But suddenly, sexuality. I mean people, you know – a lot of couples have never talked about the sexuality between them: the presence of it, the lack thereof, the quality of it, the satisfaction

and dissatisfaction, the longings, the unmet needs. You name it. An affair suddenly brings the subject of sexuality to the forefront.

MM: Mmm. And is it primarily shame that prevents people from having that conversation would you say?

EP: No. I think the first thing that makes people not have the conversation - is that on sexuality you mean?

MM: Yes.

EP: No. People grow up learning to be silent about their sexuality. Where exactly are they going to learn to talk about it suddenly?

MM: Right. But aren't we shamed into silence?

EP: Yes. Shame, reservation, prudishness – you know, all kinds of different cultural systems that make sexuality shrouded in secrecy and in silence. But shame being one of them, guilt being another of them. Ignorance the third. All kinds of social stereotypes the fourth. And I think the romantic notion. In the beginning you shouldn't bring anything up because that instantly means, you know, "If I say in the beginning, that I am missing something, you instantly are going to think that that means that you are not enough."

MM: Mmm. Right. Right.

EP: You know. The whole notion of "One person for everything, and you are everything, and you are enough" gets instantly challenged when you start to talk with somebody about wanting more and of wanting something else. Then they take it instantly personal as a failure of them, as something lacking in themselves, and so you don't speak about it.

MM: Mmm.

EP: At first you don't talk about it because you don't want to hurt, you don't want to offend, you don't want to scare, you don't want to be rejected, you don't want them to leave you – whatever the reason. So in the beginning you don't talk for a host of reasons. Then later you don't talk for a different host of reasons. And people don't know how to talk about it. They've never had these conversations. They don't know how, you know, to have them. You know real sexual conversations are enormously intimate in the beautiful sense of the word actually. Because they reveal so much about who we are and what we want and, you know, what are the emotional needs that we bring to our sexuality and how we connect to ourselves and how we connect to a partner. There's such a rich tapestry that can be revealed through the conversations. But the vast majority of couples have never had those talks. They can ask, "What do you like? Do you like to be touched on your left ear?"

MM: Right. Right.

EP: That's a very different conversation.

MM: Right. And yet you say that there are fulfillments that a marriage can never provide. What do you mean by that? And what sorts of fulfillments might those be?

EP: Different ones for different people. I mean you may choose a partner who is your intellectual equal, and he may not be your most compatible sexual partner.

MM: Oh I see.

EP: So, the first thing is just the basic. It's that there is not one person who can fulfill all your needs. The second thing is in the duality between security and adventure – which this is still a continuation of that same framework – you may have chosen someone with whom one side of the equation is more strongly affirmed than the other. You know. This is a relationship that is going to give you plenty of novelty, plenty of challenge, plenty of adventure, but maybe not the kind of stability that you also long for. This is a relationship that is going to give you a lot of the stability that you never even hoped to get in your life. But this is not a person with whom you are going to be, you know, adventuresome(ness). This person brings you something else. And, furthermore, if you want a certain kind of intensity or that something about time and continuity and familiarity with somebody, this gives you other things in life but won't necessarily give you the kind of lustful experiences that you may have when you meet someone at first and you are massively curious about penetrating the mystery of another.

That's what I mean by there are some fulfillments that the marriage, even a good one, that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship. At best we've seen perfect lives in imperfect relationships. But what the things are that you may not find, I think it's not one thing specifically. It just means to say that even a good marriage leaves people with longings for certain things that this marriage will never be for them. And so then the question is, "Do they accept it and give up, and make compromises, and say, "You can't have everything in life," which is what we always did? Or do they say, "I deserve more. I want to experience that thing and, you know, I have fifty more years to live than I used to."

MM: Right.

EP: So, it's not necessarily that we have more desires today, but we feel more entitled to pursue them.

MM: Mmm.

EP: For one, because we live in an entitlement culture. And for two, because we live in this "Right to Happiness" culture. And for three, because we live a half a century longer than we used to.

MM: Hm. Right. Right. Right. When you talk about the three elements of infidelity, I found that fascinating: secrecy, sexual alchemy, and emotional involvement. You didn't say "Sex." You said, "Sexual Alchemy." Could you explain what that distinction is?

EP: Yes. So, I think that one of the big misconceptions is that affairs, or trysts, or flings are about sex. And sometimes of course they are. But much more often they are about desire. And that is very different. You know? The desire for what? The desire to feel special, to feel seen, to feel appreciated, to be laughed at or with? The desire to be desired? That does not manifest in a sexual act per se. I mean affairs are erotic plots. And they make you feel alive. And sometimes there is massive amounts of sex, and sometimes there is just a longing for the sex, or the fantasies of the sex, which is part of why I've always said, you know, the kiss that you only imagine giving is just as powerful as hours of lovemaking, you know, just because it can carry the same charge. So that's the alchemy. The alchemy means that it's not about the actual sex. It's about the sexuality. It's the energy. It's the aura. It's the imagination of it, the anticipation of it as much or instead of the actual experience of it or doing of it if you want.

MM: Mmm. Yeah. It reminds me of Keats. It reminds me of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, you know, and that heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. Sometimes it's in the not doing that you find the deepest intensity.

EP: Oh yes of course. I mean we know that desire is rooted in absence and in longing. It's like, you know, what you can fantasize about. What you don't have is often 10 times richer than what you actually are going to experience.

MM: Right. Right.

EP: And, you know, an affair is a perfect erotic plot because it fits the erotic equation of Jack Morin: "Attraction plus obstacle equals excitement."

MM: Mmm. Hm. Brilliant.

EP: An affair is a story of attraction with massive amounts of obstacles and hence, you know, massive amounts of you can call it excitement, anticipation, whatever. But the whole story of secret lovers is the obstacles. Right?

MM: Right.

EP: So that's why the secrecy. The secrecy is in part what fuels the erotic intensity. The secrecy makes you feel like you're doing something that is entirely yours. So, it gives you the sense of autonomy and the sense of freedom, and the sense of sovereignty. That in itself is already erotic. And then you add to that the sexual energy. In many affairs, people will tell you they may have slept with the person three or four times, but the story went on for it for months. And it's an important thing also because many people who have affairs often have very good sexual relationships at home.

MM: Hm. Hm.

EP: It's not necessarily, it's not a compensation story. But it's a different sexuality. The context is different.

MM: I'd like to talk about romantic consumerism a little bit and how it affects our understanding of infidelity. What do you mean by "romantic consumerism"?

EP: Ah. It's the way that our consumer economy pedals these notions of finding "the one," of being the one, you know. It's the entire narcissistic enhancement of, "I'm so special, and especially since you are waiting until your mid-30s to find me. My God." You know? "I am the one for which you stopped your nomadic life." You know it's one thing when you have sex for the first time when you marry. It's another thing when you stop having sex with others when you marry. So a marital commitment is another, "So here I am. I am that person for which you stopped your nomadic life," you know, your promiscuous life even sometimes.

"I must be really special. I have stopped your ruminations. I have stopped your FOMO." You know? "With me you have deleted your apps. With me you no longer think that you can find better next door." So, you know, if I am so phenomenal that I can assuage your FOMO, that is romantic consumerism, that you don't think that you can find better. Consumerism is about finding better. Right? Better, younger, newer.

MM: Yes. So what you are describing is a purely selfish approach to love?

EP: Well it's not just a selfish approach to love. It's the consumer approach to love. You can say the consumer approach to love comes with self-gratification. Yes. But I think love is often a bit selfish even before we had consumerism. That's not new. I think the notion of consumerism is the fact that you feel like you have massive amounts of choice. A consumer society gives you the illusion of having choice and saddles you with the freedom of being able to dabble in such amounts of choice. And at the same time it saddles you with the tyranny of self-doubt and uncertainty about the question of if you have made the right choice.

MM: And when you say that some affairs are acts of resistance, what do you mean?

EP: "This relationship is terrible. This relationship is unequal. This relationship is oppressive. This relationship is patriarchal. This relationship is suffocating. This relationship is abusive, intimidating." You name it, and I am saying, "No."

MM: Mmm.

EP: I say no to a social status quo. I say no to a double standard that men can roam and women must, you know, should be staying put at home. I say no to the fact that, you know, men are allowed to claim their sexuality and women just have to pretend that it just doesn't matter to them. I say - it's resisting to a bunch of social scripts in society. It's resisting to our inequities. It's resisting to poor relational arrangements. It's a way of saying "No" is what I mean.

MM: Mm-hm.

EP: An affair is a way of saying, "No. I'm not playing by the rules. I'm not going on as is. I'm upsetting the status quo. I'm trumping the cards." And sometimes betrayal is part of that

because sometimes you betray somebody else but you feel like you are for the first time honest with yourself.

MM: Mmm. Yes.

EP: Do you understand? I mean...

MM: I do. I do.

EP: At this point the whole notion of betrayal is, “All the time I betrayed you, I betrayed you.” But sometimes when people have affairs they actually feel like they have been betraying and lying to themselves for years.

MM: Right. Right. So it’s a way of taking their own side finally?

EP: Yes. It’s a (inaudible), I don’t know how you say that in English.

MM: Yeah, vindication.

EP: It’s a claiming.

MM: Mm-hm.

EP: You know. But that is such a controversial idea, yeah, because it instantly becomes selfish rather than self-interested. And sometimes self-interested is not selfish. I mean it’s selfish of course, but it’s done by people who have been catering to others for decades.

MM: Got it. Got it.

EP: And for that it really requires understanding that, you know, the transgression of infidelity or the breach of contract around affairs is very important. It’s like one guy who said to me, “At least I haven’t been sleeping around,” you know, “and slept,” and blah, blah, blah. And I am like, “My dear, indifference, content, neglect – you’ve been treating your wife like shit for a long time.” You know? That is also a marital betrayal. But, you know, we know even from women who live in shelters for battered women that they will keep going back to the guy who hits them, but they will finally leave him when he cheats on them.

MM: Is that right?

EP: Yeah. Something about this one seems to topple all others.

MM: Mmm. In all of your work, Esther, have you ever seen polyamory work?

EP: Yeah. Many times.

MM: Have you? And what does that look like? Could you give me an example of what that looks like, a healthy, you know, mutually-satisfying polyamorous relationship?

EP: But I mean the first thing what I know about “work,” you mean what, that the people live together for 60 years?

MM: No, no, no. That all of the parties are satisfied; it’s transparent; and it’s somehow, you know, supporting all of the parties involved.

EP: I mean I have one very close couple of friends who live it very beautifully. I mean they do have a hierarchy. They are the primary relationship. They have the child. But they bring in other people to help them with the, well, not just to only help them. They bring in other people in their life that are involved as well with the child as with each other. There is a lot of communication about it. It requires, you know, it’s a very active communication about this. And they fundamentally care about the erotic freedom of the other person. And they have what is called compersion, you know, what the poly people call compersion. They appreciate the experiences that their partner has with others. They know the people. They tweak it all the time. They adapt it during different stages: when they are pregnant, when they have young babies, when they have older children. It breathes with them. It’s not a static thing.

I know many more non-monogamous couples than I know polyamorous couples. And then I know a lot of polyamorous couples who are doing it in the traditional “don’t ask, don’t tell” version, where it’s very clear that both partners have long-term lovers of decades – of decades – people who are in their seventies today. And they have a fairly good amount of differentiation in the relationship as well as very strong qualities of people who share their life, but they don’t share every aspect of their life together. You know. And often their entire cohort is long-divorced and remarried sometimes, and they have lasted. But they have lasted because they have actually had different kinds of marriages, different kinds of relationships with each other.

MM: Mmm. Mmm.

EP: There are lesser of them because it demands much more work than the, you know, “This is not so good anymore. It’s time to divorce and to start all over.”

MM: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Just a couple of more questions, Esther. First, when you say that, “Infidelity can be seen or treated as an antidote to death,” what do you mean by that?

EP: Mm-hm. I mean that the one word that I hear all over the world when people have affairs is that they feel alive. They don’t talk about the fact that they’re having sex. They feel alive. They feel like they are engaged with their life. They feel like they are doing something that they want when often they have not for a long time. They feel awake. They feel curious. They are intrigued with themselves because they are acting in ways that they have not done or had never done before. You know. It’s on every front. They describe an experience of aliveness, which often beats back the deadness inside, which isn’t the fault of the marriage nor the fault of the partner by the way. It’s often the deadness that they have allowed to creep in for years on their own. You know. But by definition, it’s a transgressive act. And transgression, you know, is a

breaking of the rules. And the breaking of the rules gives you a sense of ownership and freedom. And ownership and freedom gives you a feeling of aliveness.

MM: Mmm.

EP: It's a chain.

MM: Beautiful.

EP: I'm not justifying any of it. But this is the most important think, Mark, is I am – you know the minute you don't condemn it, you're instantly seen as if you condone it or if you even promote it. I am not neither for, or against, or any of this. This is really about something that is. And I am guiding the conversation about it.

MM: And that's what is so wonderful about the book is you're so fair-minded. I mean you really do look at it in the 360. You haven't oversimplified. And you have allowed human nature to be complex, which it is. That's what I love so much about the way you write about this particular subject. One last question, Esther.

EP: Mm-hm.

MM: When is sex a spiritual experience in your opinion?

EP: That depends on what people define as spiritual. But you know for some people the experience of sexuality is that they are entirely inside their body. And for other people it's that they feel that they have totally transcended the physical boundaries of their body. You know? The transcendence is the immateriality of it. It's the ability to no longer feel that you are contained within the physical world. That's for many people the definition of spiritual, a sense of complete abdication of the self. For some people it's a powerful union with another that transcends the borders between where one stops and where the other person starts and that sense of infiniteness – timelessness and infiniteness.

MM: And do you consider that one of the properties of sexuality?

EP: Absolutely.

MM: Beautiful.

EP: Absolutely. Yeah of course. But not everybody names it like that. But yes. This is one of the most amazing beauties of it is that ability to momentarily transcend, you know, the borders of Self into something that is, you know, no longer defined by physical property and that is utterly unique. It's really what we call a religious experience.

MM: Beautiful.

EP: For me the question isn't whether infidelity is good or bad. You know? It's really that right now the conversation about it is closed, not especially helpful. And the point that I am trying to make is that a judgment is not going to help us with this. But to explore this common and impactful event in our relationships in order to open up the conversation will create something that is more helpful and more healthy. And my broader critique is that the prevalence of the question, "Is infidelity bad in all its variants?" speaks to a kind of essentialist framework, you know, in which things have to be either good or bad. And typically their notion is that the one who didn't stray is by definition good just because they didn't stray. And that is not necessarily honest. You know. That's what I'm trying to open up here.

MM: Yes. Yes. Yes.

EP: It happens frequently. It's a major event in the lives of people in an intimate relationship. And I want to explore the phenomenon from an observational standpoint because I think that that is the only way that we're going to create something that is more evolving, more understanding, with new treatment modalities and the whole thing.

MM: Hm. Wonderful. Thank you so much, Esther. I'm so appreciative.

EP: Did you like the book?

MM: I love the book. I'm about two-thirds of the way through, and I'm absolutely loving it. And I can think of five people I want to give it to right away.

EP: Great. Great. Nice talking to you.

MM: You too, my dear. Thank you so much.

EP: Bye.