

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Waking Up in the Dark: An Interview with Thomas Moore

March 15, 2015



The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Mark Matousek interviews Thomas Moore, an American psychotherapist, former monk, and writer of popular spiritual books, including the New York Times bestseller "Care of the Soul." He writes and lectures in the fields of archetypal psychology, mythology, and imagination.

MM: Hello, Thomas. It's good to talk to you again and I want to welcome you to The Seekers Forum. It's great to have you here.

TM: Thank you, Mark. It's always a pleasure to talk to you.

MM: Thanks.

You know, even before "Care of the Soul," I came to your work through "Dark Eros," which is a book that really changed the way I looked at not only the nature of desire, but also the whole idea that one was supposed to be better than one is, or to aspire, to transcend the muck and the shadow and the darkness. It was such a liberation for me and when I read that book, there are a handful of lines that I underlined that have actually become a part of my practice and things that I return to over and over. So I'd like to just touch on those today and let those be the outline of what we talk about.

The first quote is: "(...) *the only morality adequate to the complexities of life is one that has been sculpted in the presence of the shadow.*" What do you mean by saying, that for morality to be adequate to the complexities of life, it needs to be sculpted in the presence of the parts of ourselves that we may disown?

TM: I think there's a tendency among even very intelligent people, intelligent in various areas, maybe not in this one, to think too plainly, simplistically, about being a moral person, and what being good or bad is, about what's good or bad. I think people, as far as I can tell, especially rooted in my experience as a therapist over many years, very good people struggle sometimes and do things that other people would consider immoral, things that maybe they themselves feel are not right, and yet they just feel such a strong pull, or maybe they just did something out of ignorance, accidentally or under emotional pressure.

Life is extremely complicated, nobody is simple. Boy, if that's not something I have learned, then I've got nothing from all those years. Everyone is complicated. That's a good thing, I think it's a very good thing. Complicated in this sense: there's a lot going on in us. And I think that if we're going to have a morality, a real morality – that it's not just an escape into some kind of simplistic idea about what's right or wrong – then we have to recognize that all of us are drawn into behavior or thoughts or saying things that are just not good and not right, things that hurt people, things that are dangerous to the world around us and so on. And if we can acknowledge that shadow, I call it that, then we have a chance of developing a morality that will really count, a morality I think we can base our lives on.

MM: And if we discount the shadow, what kind of morality do we create for ourselves?

TM: We create this attitude that “I know what’s right or wrong, and I’m a good person because I do what’s right.” Show me one person that’s always done what’s right; there is no such thing.

So what do you do with that? Do you just say, “Well, I’ve sinned, I’ve made a mistake,” or what? And then, you keep going and you don’t count it? I think what you have to do is recognize that all of us are capable of all kinds of terrible things. We don’t do them, we can become moral persons and ethical people but only if we acknowledge the shadow in ourselves and in other people and are slow to judge and understand the subtleties of behavior.

You know you look at someone, let’s say you look at a politician who is caught in some sexual misconduct which is a common occurrence. It’s so easy to moralize. I think when people moralize and judge a person like that very easily, what they’re doing is really protecting and defending themselves and they don’t have to face their own complexity or maybe their own hidden desire. But it’s easy to place that morality on someone else. Whereas someone who’s in public life, someone who’s given themselves to that life, when you enter the public life, I think you have greater challenges and your sexuality, especially, gets turned up a notch or two because that’s part of being in that extremely demanding and creative life.

I give a lot of leeway to people who have given themselves to sacrificing themselves, in a way, to the public. I think we have to acknowledge that they have to be understood, that they’ve done something special. We have to give them some breaks.

MM: That’s exactly opposite of how most people in the public think of it. They think that because they’ve taken on that role they should be held to higher standards.

TM: I know, I know. Everything I say is just the opposite, sorry Mark.

MM: (chuckles)

TM: It’s true, it’s just the way it goes.

MM: Right.

Now, even beyond the parts of the shadow that are destructive and to be resisted, isn’t it true also, that we get a measure of our richness, our individuality and our character from the so-called shadow?

TM: Well, of course. Yes. Imagine somebody who doesn’t acknowledge any shadow in their life. They are just full of virtue and wonderful and everything they do is great. What an uninteresting person. I wouldn’t want to have dinner with someone like that.

MM: It’s true. (laughs)

TM: You know it’s like, there’s no complexity there, there’s no life, there’s no saying yes to life, there’s no facing the challenges that most of us have to face, these moral dilemmas that are not easy, and we have to make choices that others may judge us for, but we do them anyway.

I tell you, when I was doing therapy, what I noticed is that there are people in marriages where the marriage is really a terrible experience, but their family thinks that divorce is evil or wrong or immoral. So, they won't get divorced. They don't necessarily agree with that, but they feel so much pressure from their family. Those family members are demanding some kind of simplistic morality for somebody else. And, I think that's pretty despicable, really. Because we have to be able to support each other and help each other get through these moral dilemmas and deal with our shadow side.

MM: But like you said, unless we welcome the shadow in ourselves, we can't open to the full 360 of another person, it's just too threatening.

TM: It works both ways at the same time. You have to be able to allow it in others and in yourself. If you leave out either one, it doesn't work at all.

MM: You quote James Hillman in the book, when he said, "(...) *our own pathologies are what make us individuals.*" That sounds so counterintuitive. You know, we're taught to resist pathology. What do you think he meant by pathology in that context?

TM: What he meant by pathology, primarily, was the impact of passion on the soul. Because the word "pathos" means to be affected, to have an impact on you, something hits you. Let's say, some desire, some longing, some fear, or some memory from childhood, some trauma, something like that hits you. It has an impact on you and you have this pathology.

An example would be someone who has abuse, physical or sexual abuse as a child. That's a pathology that has really struck them. And when I work with someone in that situation, what I try to keep in mind is that we don't want to get in a place where we wish away this experience. Because that's crazy. It happened, and there's nothing else we can do. But there is a way we can look at this experience and find that the pain, and the impact and the effect it's had on a person, can actually be worked at, can be reflected upon, and re-imagined and re-imagined to the point that it becomes a strength. That can become a moral strength for a person.

So, I think that's what Hillman meant. As you work through all these things, it's working through your pathology. I mean, you're working, you're doing something with yourself, with your life, with what's been given to you. And, in that process you become an individual instead of unconsciously joining the crowd.

MM: Hmmm-mm. And that's different than "glad that happened," or "grateful that it happened"?

TM: Oh, no, no. You never want those things to happen. It's a terrible thing to have to go through. And some people who have severe abuse never, ever get out of it. It's just so destructive. No, I don't mean that at all, I'm just saying that's an extreme example. But just think for anybody who has had experiences that have been difficult, most of us have had them, one kind or another. Some kind of pathology, some difficulty, some fear you know, jealousy, or anxiety. Fears of heights even, phobias that we may have. Not liking to be in crowds, not liking to speak in public. These kinds of things are all pathologies and, instead of trying to get rid of them, I mean – this was Hillman's work, what his

whole life-long work was saying – instead of getting rid of these things, let's acknowledge them, own them and let them do their work on us. They then help us become an individual. It's very hard to say this. Instead of remaining automatic in life, and unconscious, you've got to work at that, you've got to talk about it, you have to try to do something with it. You give it attention throughout your life, that makes you into a real person.

MM: When you say that not admitting to the negative side of desire, we're surprised when it appears and assume it to be the eruption of something completely evil or alien, you're really saying the same thing, aren't you? It's opening to the full 360 so that we don't have to dissociate from parts of ourselves when they show up.

TM: I think that's right. The other thing I had in mind there is that we can cultivate an appreciation for the shadow all the time. There may be a moment when you notice – any of us might notice – we're defending ourselves so we remain innocent, so that nobody can see our shadow; we do that all the time. Almost all of us do that.

Well, you can cultivate the shadow by just letting that be. If someone recognizes that there's something not quite perfect about you, just let it be. You don't have to defend it or explain it away. There's a temptation to speak in a way that you'll come out smelling better, that you won't be seen as dark in any way. Well, if you can cultivate that, allow that shadow, then when you are having to face some eruption that is very dark in you, then you are acquainted with it, you are used to it. You're that far ahead when you have to deal with something that's much bigger.

MM: Makes so much sense.

What do you mean when you say that marriages may be made in heaven but that they're hatched in hell? It's such a great line.

TM: I just mean to say that we tend to glorify marriage especially at the beginning. We go to weddings and talk about marriage, very often we glorify it. I know, and I guess, there are these people who have these wonderful marriages where they seem to be happy all the time. I don't know, I haven't had that experience. I don't know anyone personally who's really been able to do that. Most marriages are like a caldron where you have to face so much because your partner gets to know you quite well and knows your weaknesses and all your subtle ways of manipulating life, and all those things that normally would be private; your partner knows those things and doesn't let you get away with them and there's a lot of unconsciousness that comes out.

A lot of these complexes come forward in marriages and like the very simple and obvious one, in the more Freudian line, is the parent figure, your experience in family comes through in marriage. And then you work those things through in your marriage.

Well, all of that is very difficult stuff, people get very frustrated and for a lot of people marriage is a torture, even at the same time it's a delight, it's wonderful. It can be a mixture of both of those things. And I think very often in marriages you'll see that there is a predominance of one or the other so that some marriages are generally pretty happy

but there are those times that are really unbearable. There are other marriages that are basically unbearable, every once in a while there is something good that happens.

MM: Right. Use of the word “hatched” implies that it’s going through the hell that gives it new life and brings new life to the individual and the marriage. Is that what you’re saying?

TM: That’s essentially the same as we were just talking about, yes. If you can face those pathologies, those difficult moments, those things that are most difficult and challenging, if you can deal with those, then you understand better what marriage is, you’re not always looking for everything to be rosy. What you’re looking for is something that’s real, where you have a real relationship with someone. The intimacy seems so strong and deep-rooted, rather than superficial. I think over time your very idea of what it means to be married can change. And that’s what I mean by being hatched. It’s hatched, it becomes something real, but only after you go through these different denunciations.

MM: Beautiful.

And later in the book you talk about the conflict or the tension between soul and spirit which is such a big theme in all your work and, that the soul may be battered by the spirit’s demands. What did you mean by that? That resonated in me so deeply because I see a lot of seekers struggling to transcend their imperfections and feeling like losers and failures all the time. Is that what you mean by the soul being battered by the spirit’s demands?

TM: Yes, I think that’s part of it. There’s so many different ways of looking at it. Yes. People, with all the greatest intentions, are seekers, they’re looking. They want a meaningful life, they want to be good people, they want to be the best they can be, and, they often find communities or leaders or books or systems that are not worth their attention. There’s a lot of junk out there. You know, there’s a lot of appealing things that really are not as good as they appear to be.

And so, people will get wrapped up in things where they feel they should be in meditation hours and hours, or they should be praying or they should be giving up the various things in their life, or maybe money, or they should give up sex, or, I don’t know. There’s so many things that people go through, there’s an awful lot. I keep coming back to the sexual because it’s so important in these matters. I’ve worked with so many people who have had a spiritual background, maybe through traditional religion, maybe not, where they have been taught essentially that their sexuality is very suspect, that they should try to control it as much as possible, or maybe even just get rid of it, ignore it if possible.

I’ve worked with people like that who spend years, decades, with those thoughts. They have suffered so much and their marriages have suffered as a result, there’s just been so much unhappiness. So, that’s the way in which the soul, which just wants love, just wants some pleasure, some pleasure in life and some little satisfaction about life, and loving life. The spirit is there saying, “You need to do more, you should be better, you should reach higher,” and it’s never enough.

The demands are very strong and they're presented in ways that are so noble and so big, that the person feels bad if they don't follow them. We have to be very careful with spirit, that's why I'm always suggesting in my work, that we bring soul and spirit together, that the ordinary pleasures and desires in life are as important as those high and noble, sublime expectations of the spirit.

MM: And it really does make the whole idea of self-improvement kind of suspect.

TM: Very suspect. So suspect I would say, let's just drop that one, forget about it.

MM: Okay. That will probably appeal to a lot of people listening to this talk.

Now Thomas, when you say when someone is suffering there is someone turning the screws, someone whose job it is to tend the chamber of horrors, what do you mean? That there is a separate part of us that's holding us, turning the screws and keeping our feet in the fire? I was interested in the way you sort of created two characters there.

TM: Well you know, this book that you were mentioning at the beginning, "Dark Eros," is based on the work of Marquis de Sade. It's about sadomasochism essentially. I mean it in just everyday terms, in our ordinary interactions with people. Let's say you bump into a policeman or you go to the doctor or the dentist. A dentist is a good example.

You go to the dentist, you're going to the dentist to be helped. But that dentist is going to stick something in your mouth and it's going to hurt like crazy; there is a sadism there that's useful. But the dentist has to be willing to inflict that pain in order to protect your health. You can see how a doctor or even a policeman might be in the same position. So, there is sadomasochism in our life all over the place and it's fine because we can submit willingly to it, and that's okay. We can figure it out, decide how much pain we can take, figure what it's worth and make the agreement with whomever it is.

Well, I think we have an internal situation like that as well, that there may be an element in us where we are willing to be vulnerable in life, where we are willing to have experiences that are not the easiest to go through. I think going to school or going to college is an example of that. At least in my experience, going to college and sitting for exams and spending all that time studying, none of that is very pleasant. Much of it can cause a lot of pain. But we do it because we have a goal in mind and we allow these teachers to inflict these various tortures on us. That's okay, but it's still a sadomasochistic situation.

Now what I say in this book is a very fine balance and it can easily get out of hand. You can have teachers who have become real sadists. I've had that experience. My daughter had a teacher once who was a real sadist. Terrible, terrible sadist. There's a tendency within certain professions in that direction because that's just the nature of the thing. There's a long, long tradition about education being a sadomasochistic enterprise. So, we have to be very careful in our day-to-day lives. We submit to people, and we also submit to internal feelings and thoughts we have. We may have a super ego voice in us that says, "Now don't eat too much, don't eat those things you like." Well, if you listen to that voice constantly and just do what it says, you're not going to have much joy in life. You will be a masochist.

You will submit to that voice that's very strong in you that's always saying, "Don't do this and don't do that." You can track that voice maybe to actual people who have said that to you in the past, like your parents or teachers, but the fact is, it's been internalized and there it is, so that you might identify more often with the masochist. Other people will be just the opposite, they tend to enjoy being the sadist.

So, it's a complicated business, but that's what I was talking about.

MM: So, just the same way with self-improvement, this changes the way we think about discipline, you know, that there's a certain amount of torture that's permissible if it helps us grow, if we feel like we're expanding. But when it goes too far, then we become masochistic to the point of our own detriment. Am I getting that right?

TM: Absolutely. And then what happens, if that gets acted out with people, so that you might meet somebody and you have a sadomasochistic relationship because you will identify, you will embody the masochist, and allow the other person to be the sadist. That's what I'm saying, you may do that with the dentist and it's for your mutual good and it's okay.

But if you do that with a person, an ordinary person, let them have too much control over you, too much control over you (this happens in spiritual communities a lot), you surrender a lot of control to somebody in authority, and when you do that, then you begin to lose your own power. Gradually, you lose it and lose it and lose it and then you become a real masochist and suffer a great deal.

MM: It happens so much. My favorite passage in the book is this one: "*When the heart is freed from its benevolent captivity in ordinary morality then what does it want, where does its freedom take it?*" That is such a beautiful question. Can we talk first about what you mean by "*it's benevolent captivity in ordinary morality*"?

TM: What I mean is, maybe I'm speaking a lot for myself there, because...

MM: Oh good, be personal, that's good! (chuckles)

TM: Well, I grew up in a Catholic family and there's a lot of sadomasochism there, a lot of morality, a lot of interest in what's right and what's wrong and trying to be good. That's all I heard I think as a child, to "be good," and all the things I had to do to be good, and I couldn't be bad. And there just wasn't an option. What's bad with just having a life, being alive and being really full of vitality and individuality? That was considered though, not appropriate. So, I grew up in an environment where there was a lot of that conventional benevolent morality. These people were very kind, and just saying, "Oh you've gotta be a good kid, when you grew up then you'll be a good person and you'll be happy, you'll die and go to heaven". Wonderful way of life, very simple, pretty clear.

So I bought into that for a lot of years and have to live with it now and still admit it, years later, trying to work it all through. But that's the benevolent morality that I was talking about. Now, what happens when you take that away? Well, for me, I just got rid of that. Well, you know, it's not such a bad thing to be a kind of bad person sometimes. I don't

mean literally bad, but just doing things that counter that benevolent morality that I grew up with. I was always told to just go along, be polite and don't say too much.

Now these days, I'm writing a book on the Marquis de Sade. That would not have been approved of by my parents, you know, that's not the thing to do. Write about St. Joseph or somebody, but not the Marquis de Sade. So, I think what I've done, is, I have found a whole world open up for me when I shed that morality I grew up with. I'm really enjoying looking at some of the things that would have been the forbidden fruit when I was a child and I'm exploring these things.

Not in a bad way. I'm not going out acting wildly, I'm doing it my own way, somewhat intellectually and somewhat as a therapist. So that to me has been a great liberation and I find all kinds of interesting things about life that are attractive and fun and pleasurable and not so horrible. But, they would be "bad" in terms of that old morality.

MM: Hmm. And life is a lot more interesting, isn't it, when you open up to all of that?

TM: It's very interesting and here's the point I wanted to say a while ago, I was trying to remember it. When you do that, you become a more moral person than you would be if you remained in that benevolent morality. You're more moral because of your complexity and because you've sorted things out more and you understand that a lot of these issues are grey and some of them are very fine, and hang on very fine points on individuality and style. Another interesting point here, is a wonderful thought that comes out of Georges Bataille, who's a French writer, is that the erotic life always requires a transgression, he says. I always like that. And in order to really love life and be in life as a loving person, you have to transgress. You can't just be free and innocent all the time and never had made a mistake. You have to break the rules, you have to constantly, maybe, break rules in order to be a real, moral person.

MM: That is so wonderful and I think that's a perfect note for us to stop on. Thank you, so much Thomas, it's so good to talk to you again. This is a great conversation and I'm sure that everybody in The Seekers Forum is going to be very happy to learn from you, as always. I'm really grateful to you for taking the time.

TM: Well, Mark, this is a difficult topic but it's a very fruitful one. I'm surprised and very happy that you picked it.

MM: Thanks. Take good care.