

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Nothing Happens Before Its Time: An Interview with Jane Hirshfield

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Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview for this month's program, "Nothing Happens Before Its Time: Secrets of Creativity." Our guest is Jane Hirshfield, the award-winning poet, essayist, and translator. Ordained as a teacher of Soto Zen, Hirshfield is the author of several collections of verse, including *The Beauty* (a finalist for the National Book Award), *After* (shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot prize), as well as two important anthologies of poetry by women. Inspired by both Eastern and Western traditions, Hirshfield brings a unique, seeker's perspective to her work, and her trademark ability to marry philosophical meditation with domestic observation is entirely unique in both literary and spiritual circles. Hirshfield's writing addresses the urgent immediacies of our time, from the political, ecological, and scientific to the metaphysical, personal, and passionate. In this enlightening conversation, we talked about the ups and downs of the seekers path, and how creativity is linked to spiritual practice throughout her oeuvre, including in her just published collection of poems, *Ledger*.

Mark: Welcome, Jane, it's so good to talk to you again.

Jane: Hi, Mark. It's great to hear your voice.

Mark: I love this new book *Ledger*. It's extraordinary. I'm reading it now for the second time and seeing all kinds of things that escaped me in the first reading, which to me is the sign of really great poetry. I'd like to--

Jane: Thank you.

Mark: My pleasure. I'd like to begin by talking about the idea of ripeness. I'm interested in the idea of ripeness and how nothing happens before it's time either in spiritual life or in art. Can you talk a little bit about gestation and ripeness in creative life?

Jane: I love that. Thank you. I completely agree with you and of course with Shakespeare who said, "Ripeness is all." I think we cannot get ahead of ourselves or ahead of our age or ahead of the actuality of our own lives. For me, this present moment and its full expression is in one sense a definition of ripeness and yet we know that for fruits, for vegetables, for the world of the biosphere, there are moments when the sweetness and the fragrance of things can step fully forward and that can't be hurried. It's one of the great instructions of the natural world is, things will come into their own time at exactly the right time.

And so for me, I have a writing process where I don't in fact set advanced tasks for myself when it comes to poetry. I write the poems that arise. They will, if there is no ripeness, if it is not the time for them, I simply won't have a poem. Nothing good will come if I try to force myself. This book was very much for me a kind of surprise of ripeness because I didn't know ahead of time who I would be becoming because of the events of our time; because of the wind and soil and weathers of our age, I became a different poet around the time that I was writing these poems.

Mark: Yes. We're going to get into that more when we talk about the book directly. I'd just like to ask you a couple more questions around gestation, creativity. We live in a meritocratic culture where folks are always trying to leap, we're always trying to get ahead, we're always in this push mode and yet we lose track of our own steps. What would you say as a teacher, as a seeker, about when to be patient and when to be bold? What's are those two different experiences?

Jane: Hm. I suppose I would urge a student to understand that patience in fact is a kind of boldness. That it takes courage to wait, that it takes courage to abide in the gifts of silence, of unknowing, of not-doing. This is one of the practices of Zen, of course is, do not-doing is a shallow expression of a deep experience. I think it is from my sense that silence and fallowness are greatest friends to a writer, to a practitioner, that a great deal of my own sense of practice, of the road of practice emerges.

You can't fall over your own feet if you're sitting on the zafu, a meditation cushion. All my early training as a writer, as a human being, came from the years when instead of going off to graduate school, I went off to a Zen monastery and sat down for a very long time and found the gifts of that patience.

It takes great courage, especially as you say, in this culture where, much more now than forty years ago when I was a practicing formal monk, our culture is insisting on demonstration on activity, on a frenetic visibility and the deep taproot value of simple being, of trusting existence and what might come forth from existence is not much spoken of and not much advocated out in the broad celebrity striving culture. But I think within the community of practitioners, it is still valued, trusted, advocated, practiced, lived.

Mark: More generally, how can people work with anxiety in those moments of fallowness, those moments of silence which you see as friends and allies because you've been doing this for so long-- but for folks who are trying to manifest things in their lives, who are trying to push the river, how can they work with the anxiety over not feeling creative either artistically or in life?

Jane: I think that anxiety and embarrassment are the two most intolerable of human emotions because they don't lend themselves very well to any immediate alliance, you have to simply suffer them. This suffering is part of I suppose why I was saying that in order to sit in non-doing, that in itself is a practice of boldness. My own way of working with this was something quite a long time ago, I began to understand my emotions a little differently, which was to see them as both weather and information. The thing about weather is weather changes.

That's very hard to remember when you are in the throes of these terribly difficult emotions, but you can remember a little that weather will change, you won't be feeling anxious about the same thing five years from now. That's deeply consoling and helpful to recall, but also to take it in as information that something is not right and that something you can address. You might not be able to change the outer world, but you can address there is some reason why that anxiety is present and to unfold and explore and navigate and be with that, that also takes a little of the intolerability away from it.

When you understand, "Ah. My life is telling me something. Maybe I should inquire of it what that is, what wants shifting?" In the case of certain things, it's as simple as, "Oh, I need to apologize before I can do anything else." I simply need to apologize to the friend or the tree or the circumstance or my own discomfort with my own non-doing. Try first perhaps as a practice saying, "I'm so sorry, I did not recognize this moment for its completeness." Then see what comes after that.

Mark: Beautiful. Thank you. Now, let's turn to *Ledger*, your new book which is intimately tied to our dangerous historical moment. It's been called a pivotal book of personal, ecological, and political reckoning. It begins with a poem called, "Let Them Not Say." I'd love to hear you read if you would be willing to share that with us.

Jane: I'd be glad to.

“Let Them Not Say.”

Let them not say: we did not see it.
We saw.

Let them not say: we did not hear it.
We heard.

Let them not say: they did not taste it.
We ate, we trembled.

Let them not say: it was not spoken, not written.
We spoke,
we witnessed with voices and hands.

Let them not say: they did nothing.
We did not-enough.

Let them say, as they must say something:

A kerosene beauty.
It burned.

Let them say we warmed ourselves by it,
read by its light, praised,
and it burned.

Mark: I love that poem. To me, even though there is a pre-cataclysmic tone to it, there's also hope in that poem to me. Is that an accurate reading? Is there hope in that poem?

Jane: I think that is a marvelous question and of course, what one finds in the poem is often a mirror of both the person looking and listening and also the particular weather of the moment of listening. I think you are right to hear the hope. The poem is very dark because it is speaking from a future imagination of failure. It's a dark poem, but the repetition of 'let them not say,' the hope resides in that because what the poem is saying is this does not have to be the future.

We could do enough, let them not say they did nothing, we did not-enough. That is the line that you are supposed to not take 100% at its own value. It is the line that insists, “Ah, it is time to do more,” and avoid the prediction of this poem, of a world that has burned.

Mark: That's what I heard in it. I'm glad.

Jane: I'm very glad [crosstalk]

[laughter]

Jane: I don't want this book to cast its readers into despair because despair is a prescription for inaction. I want this book to be a bell that summons the fire truck to the fire.

Mark: Exactly. In another piece, there's a line that I absolutely loved. It's, "If the unbearable were not weightless, we might yet buckle under the grief of what hasn't changed yet." "If the unbearable were not weightless, we might yet buckle under the grief of what hasn't changed yet." What do you mean by weightless in this context?

Jane: I mean that the unbearable lives in the realm of emotions and emotions are not concrete. They are flickering presences within us in some dimension that can't be put on a scale, but of course, the line-- you're very good at catching lines that have multiple dimensions of reading to them. Partly what it is saying is we should be buckling under the grief of what hasn't changed yet. We should be.

In the poem, is talking about a lot of things, that's a long poem with many steps on its staircase, it talks about evolution and geology and terrorism and the Syrian civil war. It talks about the International Space Station traveling over our heads, and it talks about the fishes, which are, although this isn't named in the poem, swimming at the time I wrote it in waters that were killing them from toxic releases from a time of storm and flood.

I was overwhelmed by what I was living in, what I was seeing, what was in the news during that period by the fact that I was waiting literally calf deep in the evidence of climate change because I was on an island that was only five feet above sea level at its highest point. But the refrain of that poem is the line at its opening and its ending. None of this had to happen. And so, again, the line, "If the unbearable were not weightless, we might yet buckle under the grief of what hasn't changed yet" is talking about both are falling and are standing at the same time.

Mark: Wonderful. Thank you. I'd like to ask you to read another poem, if you wouldn't mind, which I love, "My Doubt." Could you look at those?

Jane: Yes, I will, there it is. Okay. I'm going to say before I read it that one of the Buddhist teachings which have stayed with me from the first time I heard about it very early on in my entrance into formal practice is that Buddhist practice rests on a tripod: great effort, great faith, and great doubt. That teaching seems to me centrally important in its embrace of doubt and skepticism and it's turning away from an unbalanced certainty, because one of the things that Buddhists practice is about is 'don't know mind,' is foregoing the arrogance of what seems security. But there's no security in certainty. There is a great deal of security in questioning, in investigation. Okay, that was a long preface.

Here is the poem. "My Doubt."

I wake, doubt, beside you,
like a curtain half-open.

I dress doubting,
like a cup
undecided if it has been dropped.

I eat doubting,
work doubting,
go out to a dubious cafe with skeptical friends.

I go to sleep doubting myself,
as a herd of goats

sleep in a suddenly gone-quiet truck.

I dream you, doubt,
nightly—
for what is the meaning of dreaming
if not that all we are while inside it
is transient, amorphous, in question?

Left hand and right hand,
doubt, you are in me,
throwing a basketball, guiding my knife and my fork.
Left knee and right knee,
we run for a bus,
for a meeting that surely will end before we arrive.

I would like
to grow content in you, doubt,
as a double-hung window
settles obedient into its hidden pulleys and ropes.

I doubt I can do so:
your own counterweight governs my nights and my days.

As the knob of hung lead holds steady
the open mouth of a window,
you hold me,
my kneeling before you resistant, stubborn,
offering these furious praises
I can't help but doubt you will ever be able to hear.

Mark: Thank you so much. Now, I wanted to ask you a bit more about doubt, and where doubt, where a healthy, constructive, useful doubt tips into what you might call toxic doubt or paralyzing doubt. How can practitioners as well as creators find that tipping point and not allow cynicism or skepticism to strip them of hope, of inspiration, of a vision?

Jane: Well, there you have that three-legged tripod, “Great faith, great effort, and great doubt.” It’s not doubt alone. It’s doubt in balance with these other elements in our life. I think we all at different times in our life require a different correction of course, and it is perfectly true that a person paralyzed by self-doubt, a person who only has fallen into cynicism, which you are right to name as doubt which has become so pervasive that no trust can abide for that person.

It’s a kind of hell realm to contemplate leading your life in a condition in which no feeling of rightness could come, no feeling of trust could come. My poem is probably a prescription for people who are not in exactly that impasse. It is for the people who are more certain and less open to questioning. But I do think the acupuncture point in all of this is the spirit of question asking. Questions don’t need to be seated in self-opinion. Questions are wonderfully-- they are the neutral fish that can swim through, every dangerous fish, every friendly fish through the corals.

Questions just are transparent water in a way that can hold a life in a feeling of curiosity rather than opinion. Openness, rather than the slam shut doors of thinking you know everything there is to know. I'm going to make a big leap forward here and say that for me, one of the qualities that for me has been most helpful as an antidote to despair during this time when it can look as if the entire structure of the social compact and the entire web of the biosphere are under threat of complete collapse.

One of the antidotes for me has been to cultivate the spirit of humility. The spirit of humility is a spirit that asks questions. It is that sense of 'don't know mind' because when I fall into the despair of thinking that collapse is inevitable, the only way I can find to rescue myself from that state is by taking myself in hand and saying, "Oh, you think you know the future? You think you know? How can you know?"

Anything can happen at any moment, anything can happen. That is the great rescuing of questions of humility, of never taking our own opinion as 100% correct. But also there are certainly moments in any life when you feel the absolute perfection of things as they are. When you do feel sure that your own feet are standing on the own ground in accord with gravity, in accord with every condition of being and those moments are also great rescuing anchors in our human lives, and I do not mean to dismiss them.

They are essential, they are indispensable. The memory of them even when you can't quite find your balance to them, that also matters and helps just to remember, "Ah, I have known a moment when everything was perfection." This is one of the paradoxes of spiritual life which are after all built on paradox. In every spiritual tradition, you find at least some of the mystics speaking in the tongue of paradox. At the same time, I can firmly believe that one must always doubt, one must always question and firmly believe that there are moments that survive the questioning to which the answer is, "Yes, yes. This is so."

Mark: I'd like to ask you about contentment, you have a poem about contentment which dovetails nicely with what we were just talking about. You reject contentment, as you put it into it, "certain inexperienced saints have been seen to vanish in a burst of somewhat cloudy light."

[laughter]

Jane: That is two-thirds of the poem.

[laughter]

Mark: This is the part I wanted to ask you about, why cloudy and why does contentment not appeal?

Jane: There is a hidden second meaning to contentment behind that poem, which is that contentment can too easily glide into complacency and it is complacency-- the poem follows "My Doubt" in the book, they are a kind of pair. I worry that it is that easy contentment is complacency and that it is a danger for those of us in spiritual practice if you-- we have seen it. We have seen it, forgive me, in so many of the Buddhist teachers whose conduct has come under correct questioning over the decades that Buddhism has been in this country.

Those teachers are pretty sure they know something. They're pretty content with their own practice and look what happened. I was happy when the phrase "inexperienced saints" came to

me and “somewhat cloudy light” because again it’s simply not questioning one’s own experience quite enough. There is an uncloudy light but easy contentment that’s not there yet. Have I kind of addressed the question?

Mark: Yes, it makes total sense, absolutely. Just one last question, Jane. On a personal note, what are the things that give you joy in your life today?

Jane: Today, talking with you. I was introduced to a phrase. I went to Australia, which as we know, as we speak, I don’t know by the time this airs, but as we’re having this conversation, the southeast quadrant of Australia is completely on fire. As someone who lives in California and has lived near to some of the fire storms here and who once fought a forest fire in the wilderness, my heart is with the people and the animals and the entire ecosystems which are under these flames caused by us, caused by climate change in part.

I’m sorry, I completely lost track thinking about that. What gives me joy? Okay, a phrase I learned when I went to Australia two summers ago was, this is an exclamation of general happiness in Australia, the phrase “you beauty.” It’s not necessarily addressed to a person, although it can be, but it’s just a general exclamation of happiness, “you beauty.” After I learned it, I took up the practice of every morning when I open my eyes and here is the world exclaiming, “you beauty!”

Mark: I love that.

Jane: It’s a good way to start the day [laughs].

Mark: Great way to start the day.

[laughter]

Mark: Well, Jane, thank you so, so much for taking the time. It’s wonderful to talk to you, and I encourage everyone to get a copy of *Ledger*. It’s an extraordinary book. Jane Hirshfield is one of my favorite poets. Thanks for being with us.

Jane: I enjoyed every moment of speaking with you, Mark, and I thank you for all the work you are doing to help all beings in this world.

Mark: Thanks, my dear, talk to you soon.

Jane: Okay, bye-bye.

Mark: Bye-bye.