

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Living Without a Net: An Interview with Mirabai Bush

April 2020



Mark: Welcome, Mirabai, it's really good to see you, and thanks for joining us for the interview.

Mirabai: I'm happy to be here. I'm having to stop myself from reading all the book titles behind you.

[laughter]

There're some good ones there.

Mark: There are.

Mirabai: My first thought before we get into whatever subject. I just wanted to tell you that while I was writing this book with Ram Dass on dying, *Walking Each Other Home*, I thought about you so often, and the work that you did to help him with *Still Here*. I just had a really great appreciation for you. It's not everyone who can work that intimately with Ram Dass. We had a great time because by the time I worked with him he was really mellow.

[laughter]

I know he wasn't right after the stroke, but anyhow, I just had a new appreciation for you.

Mark: Thank you, Mirabai, thanks. That leads into what I was going to start out by asking you, because of Ram Dass, because of his passing, because of the book you just did with him. How can we live with this intense proximity of death and dying, that this pandemic has brought? People are having to deal with the probability of impermanence and sickness in a way we never have as a planet before. Could you say a few things about how people might learn from this?

Mirabai: Yeah. Well, since we were talking about Ram Dass, we know that maybe his greatest teaching was that you use everything in your life to learn from. That so shifts the way you go through life, and so that when difficult things come, he would call it fierce waves, you see that as this great opportunity to learn, because when things are difficult, all your resistances come to the surface, and you get to see them. You don't like them, but you get to see them, and then you can let the unnecessary ones go.

There's that about it. I think that in writing this book – we did it over two years, he died in December, but until then, he was in a wheelchair. We met in his room, and we told each other that we would, because we both talked a lot about death and dying over time, and we're both old – we wanted it to be really fresh. We wanted it to be not just the words that we had learned from others usually, but what we had learned from our own experience of living this long.

We said, we'll say what we know, and we won't say what we don't know. If we find ourselves on a riff that came from somewhere else, we'll stop and start over. It was very, very fresh, and intimate and really wonderful. Our subject was loving and dying because they're so interconnected. Here was an opportunity for me to talk about dying, think about dying, allow my fears about dying to arise. It was on our own terms, so it wasn't what we're going through now.

I wasn't really terrified of dying when we started the conversation, but I, of course, had certain fears around it. I got to look at them, and bring them close, look at them, realize most

of them were just getting in the way, because after all we're all going to die. We would like to choose the time and method when we die, but it doesn't always happen that way. It is a natural part of life. It's another moment in life. Just keeping it conscious all those two years it took us, it really started falling away, and I now find that I'm just simply easy with it.

Who knows when the time comes, but I just have much more of an ease with it. I think one thing is here it is all around us now. It's just a unique situation where we're afraid of people we love dying. We know we could die ourselves, and it could happen very quickly. We see people in the news dying. We're with it in all these different ways, and I just think we need to see what our own fears are. Also, be willing to grieve in ways that allow us to express emotion, and at the same time, celebrate the wonderful things about people we love who have died as well as our own hurting from missing them.

Mark: Yeah. Do you think that there's a connection between sacrifice and spiritual growth?

Mirabai: Good question. Well, how do you define sacrifice?

Mark: Not being able to go outside, not being able to see your friends, not being able to depend on the future, having all of your plans fall apart. It's humility and sacrifice all wrapped up together.

Mirabai: It can be if you can use it that way. It also can just make you really miserable, and so that you can't see beyond your own wanting it to be a different way. Again, it's like being able to be in the moment, and without these desires that it would be different from what it is. Which doesn't mean that you don't do anything you can to make a difference, to take care of yourself, protect yourself in whatever role you're playing in this, helping to make it better, but it's being with it that really helps you learn from it.

Of course, the conversations with friends, maybe reading good things, doing potentially helpful things online, that all helps, but just knowing that this is a situation that is so new that I could really learn from it, because all kinds of things will arise that haven't arisen before.

Mark: What are the benefits, do you think spiritually, psychologically, to having to simplify, to having to cut back, and really getting down to basics?

Mirabai: Well, there are a lot even though we're mostly kicking and screaming about it. Clearly, in this country, I venture to say, that almost all of us have more stuff than we need, and more stimulation, and more activity. And so, looking at that, I noticed that with all these ads that come up online, and usually, they're ads from the few places that I buy from regularly, and I just look at them now, and I realize I have absolutely no need for that. I remember that feeling that rose before, "Oh, that looks pretty good." There're so many potentially positive aspects to it.

Traditionally, spiritually, the way you renew and deepen is on retreat, and this is like a retreat. On retreat you live really simply, the food's really simple, and this is true in all the different traditions, food's really simple, activities are really simple, maybe walking in the woods or down the street, not speaking, and just decreasing stimulation. You do that so that you can see what's inside, and you can learn from what's arising.

People are beginning to really write about it now how this can be a really good exercise in learning how to live better for the planet, the environment, using fewer resources. I hadn't

been out of the house except for a walk in the neighborhood for two weeks, because EJ my husband, was going out for food. Yesterday, I did drive him to drop his car off. I was actually [chuckles] in the car on the road for a while. I passed a gas station, and gas was \$1.99. I thought, “Wow.” Then I realized, “How ironic.”

Mark: When we can't go anywhere.

Mirabai: Nobody's going anywhere [chuckles], but it's so great that nobody's going anywhere because the air is getting cleaner, the waters getting cleaner. We can live with so much less than we do. We get to at least have a few experiences during this time, which could lead us to question the whole thing.

Mark: Question what whole thing?

Mirabai: The whole reality we've created around us that requires so much stuff, so much feedback around who we think we are, and the way in which we do our work, all of it.

Mark: Right. What do you think it can teach us about different ways of staying connected and relating? I think of you are someone who's a connector, and creating relationship, and looking at relationship in the workplace or in everyday life. Are there some things that you would suggest for people to be able to stay more heart connected with each other?

Mirabai: Yes. It's tricky. When you're desperate, you do what you can. Well, it's interesting about the online connection. Imagine if this had happened, I don't know, 20 years ago. We certainly wouldn't have face-to-face communication there. Not that this is really face-to-face, but we wouldn't have visual communication. Finding ways to work with the internet that feel more real than usual, that feel more intimate and connected.

My first notice of it was in one of the first days that we were isolated, John Legend did a series of real concerts at home. He's just at home on his own piano, just singing and playing the piano, his daughters running around. He must have a music room, it didn't look like a living room, but it look was clearly home, and he had a sweatshirt on or something. There was something so intimate about it and I don't know him, love his music, but I felt like we were together in a way that I hadn't felt online music in the past. I think there really are ways that we can be more at home with each other, more intimately connected, more genuinely connected with each other electronically.

At the same time, it's getting to be a bit of an overload. There are now so many good things, do you want to listen to and watch, because we're all going through the same thing. It's important to just spend some time in nature or if that's not available, doing whatever it is that you do, taking a bath, that remind you, for this time, you are enough, in this body, by yourself with whatever it is that's surrounding you.

Mark: I've noticed that I have this desire to connect more deeply with the people in my life. The people I don't necessarily stay in touch with a lot. I want to check in, “How are you?” There's an intensity of connection I'm finding now in seclusion that I want to stay aware of after this passes.

Mirabai: I know it. I know. It's interesting, and I find both that I've done that and the people have been reaching out to me as well in a very connected way.

Mark: You touched on apocalyptic thinking and going to the worst scenarios. Would you recommend just using plain old mindfulness for that or are there other practices that you can recommend when people go to their worst fear?

Mirabai: Yes. There's just a little quick one you can do, and if you catch yourself in the middle of it, it's not going to change everything but sometimes it's really helpful, which is, you're looking at the apocalypse. You clench your fists really tight and you're there, your eyes closed, you're feeling the fear in your body. You're feeling just all the things that you don't want to happen. You're imagining they're happening, and you can feel in your body that heat and the tightness, and the rigidity really, or fire, however you feel it. You clench your fists as tight as you can. Then you breathe in, and then as you breathe out, you slowly, slowly, open your hands or your fingers with your palms up. Then you just sit there for a few moments, just being with what is right now in this moment, and hope that that shakes it loose a little bit.

Mark: It's like clenching the mind and then releasing the mind.

Mirabai: Yeah.

Mark: We touched on this a little bit, but I had this idea that social distancing itself can be a spiritual practice.

Mirabai: [laughs] Yes. Say more about that.

Mark: Well, it puts you in touch with your own aloneness, and it goes to what you're talking about around retreat, and being aware of personal space in a different way. It feels like it can be used for attention.

Mirabai: I think so. I think you're right. There's a way in which you have to take responsibility for your personal space because nobody else is going to do it. Also, loving-kindness practices are really helpful at this time also in that you imagine, bring into your mind, someone who's at a distance from you. Then just bring into your mind everything that you care about, about that person. You might imagine the fragility of that person. Just as you feel vulnerable and fragile right now this person is feeling vulnerable and fragile also. You just begin to breathe imagining that you're breathing in and out of your heart, imagining that you are sending these warm, caring, kind thoughts for the well-being of that person. You can just sit and continue to do that for as long as feels right to you.

That can give you this real sense of connection and care for another, because a part of what's discouraging, I think, or hard at these times without other people is that we also feel helpless and vulnerable. We feel like we can't do anything to make this better. We can't help anybody else who is struggling. Some people are really, really, struggling at every level, psychological, spiritual, physical. Seeing all that suffering and not being able to contribute to relieving it in the ways that you usually do. There are some ways to do it, but it can be very hard. Just imagining that person, and experiencing your own love for that person or people I think can be helpful.

Mark: That happened to me just the other day. A couple of days ago a friend was going through a hard time and we were taking a walk, and there were no words. All I wanted to do was give her a hug. It's the only thing that would have actually helped in that moment, but I thought about it afterward, I realized that you can do what you were talking about. Just going

into your heart and sending love, and opening to what they're giving back, we can learn to – obviously nothing replaces physical touch – but it can do a different kind of good I think.

Mirabai: Yes, I think so too. When I first learned that practice, which is a long time ago, people would say, “Well does the person on the other end know that you're sending it?” All of that stuff fell away over time of practicing it. I realized that it's very powerful. It opens your loving-kindness. Then it also helps you hold that person in a very sweet way.

Mark: One of the things I've always admired about you is, you go into the corporate world, you go into organizations as a seeker, as a former, sort of Dharma bomb, as a Neem Karoli Baba devotee, and you bring this wisdom to a secular context. One of the challenges I think people are having now is, how do you surrender if you have no faith?

Mirabai: You don't need to have faith in the divine or God, or divine. You can think of it as having faith in the unfolding of life. How did you connect that to corporate life, were you thinking that's a place where people don't usually talk about these things and how do you do it?

Mark: When I think of corporate life, and obviously this, I think of as a very secular world. You're bringing us the spiritual into a secular world. I think one of the problems for people who have no spiritual practice is they are being asked to surrender to this mystery in a whole new way.

Mirabai: Yes. Well, most of these practices don't require a surrender at the beginning. They only surrender they require is maybe that you surrender into taking instruction from somebody you don't know, but they're so safe. Close your eyes, you could be doing anything in there. I teach the incoming first years at Amherst College, about 65 of them each year. I do an intensive orientation in their first three days on campus, part of one of that is mindfulness and yoga. At first, I thought, "How great. So many are signing up for this. They must really want to learn mindfulness. I later came to think that, there are quite a few in there for whom this was the least worst of the things that they could choose from. They didn't want to do service in the community or organic gardening. It's clear to me that they're sitting there and they're quiet and their eyes are closed, I have no idea what they are doing.

Anyhow, it's basically really safe. The practices themselves aren't about having faith in anything outside yourself. It's just learning from what you are experiencing. You're sitting there, you are attempting to keep your mind on – there are a lot of different practices, but we'll continue to use this one as the example – you try to keep your mind on your breath, you see your thoughts and emotions arising, wow, and then you let them go. You begin to learn there's a lot going on in there. “Oh. My mind is so busy.” “Oh. No wonder I can't be creative at work.” Or, “I can just let that go. If it's important, it'll come back later.” They begin by seeing their own minds and learning that everything is changing all the time. That's huge. You can learn that from watching your own mind. It doesn't matter if you're in a church or in the Googleplex.

Mark: Is that what you mean by faith in the unfolding?

Mirabai: I think that you begin to understand how your behavior is creating your life. In Eastern philosophy, they call it karma. You begin to see that what's arising within you has to do with how you've been behaving all along. You begin to understand in as much as you move toward more responsible, ethical, loving behaviors, what's arising in your life is more a

reflection of that. Then you begin to feel, what I felt in the beginning, was just that I was more at home on the planet. I just felt like I belonged here. Just somehow knowing about how my own mind was working, and that I could really know it and I could continue to see what was going on in there made me feel safe. More that I was choosing my behaviors instead of them running away with me running after them.

Mark: What about surrendering to something like this pandemic? If you have no sense of a divine order, no sense of what is beyond you, how do you find the optimism and the trust to lean in in a moment like this?

Mirabai: Yeah. Well, it's happening. What I've found is, I've done a lot of work both for social change and with social activists, and so that kind of question is always there, like, "How can you accept what's going on in the world?" Even before the coronavirus there was a lot of bad stuff happening. In as much as you can accept this moment, and this is what's going on right now, you're able to see it for what it is and then make choices going into the future that will help relieve that suffering.

Not many of us are able to contribute directly. All our friends who are in healthcare can, of course, but what we can do by seeing what's happening now, "Oh yeah. This is happening all around the world, and I am really uptight about it." I can see that in as much as I can let those negative feelings go, maybe I could be helpful to somebody else. Maybe I could make a loving phone call this afternoon, instead of being pissed off.

Mark: It comes from having choice about how to respond?

Mirabai: Yes, I think surrendering into the moment is more about seeing the moment for what it is, recognizing it in all that it is. Then if you want to make change, you go back doing that. It's surrendering in the sense of acknowledging, "Yeah, it's here, we can't change this moment. It's here," but you can make change going forward.

Mark: Beautiful. Just one last question, what is it that gives you hope in your life?

Mirabai: It's always a good question. I was recently with Brother David. Did you know who he was? Wonderful teacher.

Mark: David Steindl-Rast?

Mirabai: Yes. He is now in his nineties. He was giving his archive to the University of Massachusetts, and I was part of a group to honor him at the university. He came, and it was before the virus happened, but we were talking about the state of the world. He was saying that he just was not seeing much positive happening. He was really discouraged and so on. He was asking us what we were seeing. One of us said to him, "Brother David, you say you don't have any hope for the future?" He said, "No, I didn't say that." He said, "I have hope. I understand hope to be the willingness to be surprised."

Isn't that good? There's always hope as long as you keep that willingness open.

Also, the extraordinary creativity that comes when people are free from these attachments and stresses and so on. In as much as you can let go of them, it creates a space for creativity that I think anything could happen. That's another big lesson for right now. Did we ever think a couple of weeks ago that we would all be home and nothing would be happening, and

everything else that's been going on? Do we ever imagine that? No. There are other more positive things that could happen that we could never imagine at the moment.

I do get really discouraged, particularly, looking at the political world, but I still do have faith in the deep goodness and compassion in people.

Mark: Very true. Thank you Mirabai so much.

Mirabai: This was fun.

Mark: That was great. I really, really appreciate it.