The Seekers Forum Transcript

Listening to Psyche: An Interview with Elizabeth Lesser

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THE SEEKERS FORUM

Mark: Hello. This month's guest interview is with Elizabeth Lesser, whose new book, *Cassandra Speaks*, is an important testament to the power of the female voice in society throughout the ages. Elizabeth has been an activist, a teacher, as well as the co-founder of the Omega Institute, and is one of the most sensitive and thoughtful people that I know. I hope you enjoy our interview.

The book is all about Cassandra and what Cassandra knew and no one believed her. I just want to ask you, what do you think women know that we need in this time of crisis?

Elizabeth Lesser: Okay. Well, I feel I have to go back and talk about the process of writing the book, but I just want to say, you are the first person I am talking to about this book.

Mark: I'm honored.

Elizabeth: It hasn't been published yet, it will be in September 2020. I'm practicing with all of you, with you Mark. I couldn't think of a better person to do this with, my buddy and someone I respect so much.

So, as one of the founders of Omega and a curator of conferences for many, many years, more than forty years now, I have convened many conferences for women over the years, starting back in the 1980s and '90s.

I started doing a conference called Women in Power, probably ten or fifteen years ago. I had this idea one day, because I myself was a woman in a powerful role, people get really uncomfortable when you put those two words together -- women and power. It made *me* uncomfortable. "What is this thing I have in me that I'm not supposed to own my power?"

I started convening conferences around it, bringing powerful women from a whole different variety, there are artists, leaders, doctors, and astronauts, everyone I could think of. What is your relationship to power? What do you think power is and isn't, and how can women be different in it?

The book really took years and years of that kind of in-depth research and I tried for these times, when the issues about gender are so confusing. Here I am talking to you, a man who I consider to have a very evolved feminine. I did not want the voice of the book to be exclusive, exclusionary to people for who either feel gender-fluid, or men, women. I also didn't want to use that kind of goddess language of the feminine.

It took me so many years to find the right voice for this book, which is that, yes, to really claim it, women do have something the world needs now, and can we do it in a way that includes. So, I looked to those old myths, Adam and Eve, Cassandra, Pandora, all sorts of Shakespearean plays, and literature, and the way our culture has told women, "Be quiet, you were born second but you were the first to sin." Huge variety of myths, from the Greeks, to the Hindus, and Buddhists, and Christian, and Jewish, women came second, but they wrecked stuff anyway. I forget your original question. [chuckles]

Mark: Just, I'm curious to know, particularly in this crisis that we're having, in this moment, what do women know that the world needs to hear?

Elizabeth: One aspect of the book that I spend a lot of time in is helping us to rid our language and our concepts of war, that war is the metaphor to solve all problems. This against that, winning against losing. As you can see, our president is calling himself a war president,

we're talking about the war on this virus. When that's the first metaphor, and testosterone does drive that concept of war and battle, and all of the myths that humans still live by, are the hero's journey, the battle myth.

Coronavirus is to me less of an enemy and more of a messenger. The coronavirus has come to tell and teach us something. I do think women have a capacity to listen before attacking, to absorb this idea of the nurture, the instinct to care before the instinct to combat. That's why it isn't only that women have only been allowed to be in the nurturing roles, it's our instinct to do that, to nurture and care. The problem is that we have reduced those jobs, and roles, and instincts to second class behavior, your kindergarten teachers, whereas firemen and women like heroes, kindergarten teachers, "Yes, it's really nice."

Actually, I'm all about, and the book is about giving a musculature, a strength, a power to care, and love, and goodness, and the instinct to stop, listen, learn, care, as opposed to battle, prevail, win.

Mark: I love the way you talk about grade school teachers as the first first responders.

Elizabeth: Right. First responders are awesome. Thank you first responders, but there are, what I call, as you say, the first first responders. If we were energizing respect, let's say, for a kindergarten teacher, who's teaching boys and girls how to communicate, how to iron out relationships before battling, mindful behavior, "Stop, look at yourself first, learn how to deal with your own ego," those are the first first responders. If we elevated that, oh my god, paid more, respected more, elevated statues in parks about kindergarten teachers. It's not just them, it's nurses, it's home care people, it's mothers and fathers and the people who care, Mark. Not that policemen and firemen don't care, but it's a different way of caring.

Mark: Of course, I love what you talked about the statue in Central Park and putting a woman giving birth next to the guy in battle. How that would shift our sense of what strength looks like.

Elizabeth: I live in New York, so I'm often in Central Park. For years, I'd walk by those statues, never looked at them really. One day I just was walking and I was walking from uptown on Fifth Avenue, all the way across the park, downtown more. I came upon, I think, four different statues of young, beautiful men in battle holding their bleeding compatriots dying, or General Sherman on a gold horse. I thought, "Wow, where are the statues of a woman giving birth?" Like there's blood, there's blood with the soldiers. There's trying and physical strength. What about that? It might sound absurd to see a woman with her legs spread and a baby coming out, why not? Who decided this?

Mark: I love that. That's great. Let's talk a little bit more about our current situation before we get more into the book. A lot of people are talking about this being a new era now, that the virus has really shifted and feeling like we're never going to be the same. Do you have that kind of parrot? Do you have that sense of that we've really crossed over into a new era?

Elizabeth: I would love that. That'd be great. I don't like the old era, but that's just not historically evident that massive things happen; wars, plagues, environmental disasters, 9/11, and suddenly the world totally changes and people start singing kumbaya, and it's all great. I think we learn incrementally very, very slowly. I hope we will learn a few things, but I don't expect it to be there was then and here's now. Maybe the gods will intervene and that will happen, but that's not history. I think there's always an edge of the populace who get what

the virus, or the war, or the fires has come to teach us, who are actually saying, "Hello, COVID-19, sent from God, what have you come to show us?" I think a lot of people are saying that, not enough to totally change the world, but if those of us who even have that consciousness stick with it and be it, really inhabit it and have it strengthen what we already knew, that we asked for one world, we got it. It doesn't only just show up as unicorns and rainbows; it also shows up as viruses and as culture clashes. So we have to, more than anything right now, accept this.

This messenger is telling us oneness takes a lot of work and it takes a lot of ego softening. To say, "I am big enough to hold oneness," which has a lot of beautiful, unifying love, and it also has a lot of darkness. Here's an example of it. Can we hold it? Can we accept it and not have a tantrum like, "I don't want this, I don't like being in the house"? We asked for it, we want to go and travel wherever we want whenever we want, we want to be a global community; well, we're going to share everything then.

Mark: Everything. Exactly. Matthew Fox said we live in a beautiful world not a pretty one.

Elizabeth: Yes. Oh, that's so nice.

Mark: I love that. There's going to be some shift and it's going to be incremental, and there are going to be people who are still in the playing the blame game as we see with the Chinese virus. There's also an edge that's growing and creative.

Elizabeth: I do believe that. I think each one of us who feels that way, it's a huge responsibility not to slip into fear and/or into weariness, or like, "Hey, life's a bitch, and then you die," like, well, what's new about this? No, this could be incredibly new. As the Sufi say, "Trust in God, but tie your camel." Like stay super open, super hopeful, and really logical about it.

Mark: Let's talk about the Garden of Eden and the Adam and Eve story. Can you offer a new interpretation of how to see the Adam and Eve story?

Elizabeth: I spent so much time living in that story. In the book, I write about a painting that I saw in Florence many, many years ago. I don't know, thirty. I was at the tail end of one of those dark periods in your life, this happened to be a divorce, and a divorce that just rocked, as most people's do, every aspect of my life; finances, children, everything.

There's an incredible two-paneled huge painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence of Adam of Eve. I was so much in the conversation of men and women, and whose fault was it, and blame, and fear and paranoid, the whole thing. Everybody watching who's been through a split up knows this feeling. I stood there for a long time looking at this painting. It's now my screen saver, it's become a huge part of my life.

In it, Adam is standing there looking like, "I don't know what happened. I don't know why we got to leave this garden." Just innocent and beautiful in his body, and Eve's got the serpent wound around her, and her eyes are crafty. She's looking at Adam like, "Get it together, dude, we got to grow up. We have to leave this garden, we're not children anymore."

I started reinterpreting the myth the minute I saw that painting. Like, no, Eve and the serpent weren't evil, and Adam wasn't this golden, strong human who was in conversation with God

but made a mistake by listening to Eve. Eve was the grown-up. She knew it was time to individuate from Father God and it was time to leave the paradise of the womb or the paradise of childhood and go out into the world and learn the lesson that we were put here to learn; how to live in this garden responsibly as adults, not as children.

That is the way I began to interpret it after seeing that painting. I've been reading about it from Jungians and religious scholars on both sides. I don't know how literal interpreters of the Bible are going to welcome this book. The minute you stray into reinterpreting the way myths have been interpreted. Myths, sorry religious literalists, were written by people and interpreted by people. Most of those people were men. Men wrote the Greek myths. Men wrote the Bible stories. Men have interpreted them. Nothing wrong with that, but if women had also written stories and interpreted stories, same time of history, with the same equal voice, it would've been different.

The story of Eve and Adam in the garden, what is it? It's a way of trying to explain to us, who are lost humans, "Why is it so hard here in the garden? We have everything we need, why is life so hard? Why do we die? Why is there sometimes pestilence, and viruses, and wars? Why can't we get along?" "Oh, okay, let's tell this story. It was great, but then this woman listened to a snake and we got thrown out." Then you build a whole worldview around that.

Mark: Part of this book's purpose is to jettison that worldview and replace it with something that's more integrated, balanced, fair? [crosstalk] Go ahead, sorry.

Elizabeth: Sorry, go ahead.

Mark: You go ahead.

Elizabeth: Well, not to throw it out. Those old myths, and hero's journey, and the Garden of Eden, not that they're not beautiful and have a lot of viable story lines in them, and something to learn from and listen from, but to understand they're a slice of the story, and that slice left out some storytellers, some points of view. It's like if you go to the movies and watched a World War II movie, let's say, and that was the only story you ever learned, "This is what life is, this is how people act, these are the only things that matter," you'd think, "Oh, that's the story of humanity." If you went and watched a romance and that was the only thing you ever watched, "Oh, people love each other, sometimes they hurt each other, but in the end they make back at the --

Mark: The Empire State Building.

Elizabeth: Empire State Building.[laughs] That's how it works." We learn by these stories.

Mark: Sure. We also set up a lot of expectations through these stories.

Elizabeth: Right.

Mark: When I saw you last when we were doing the Woodstock Festival together, you were talking about feeling a little nervous about the reception of this book, and how men were going to respond to it, and how women would respond to it, particularly in the parts where you're talking about how women shame men for having emotions sometimes. Are you feeling nervous about it now?

Elizabeth: Well, you're a writer and you teach writing, so I imagine a lot of us watching today are also writers, or love writing. Writing a book, now, that's a journey, [chuckles] that's worth a myth. At least when I'm writing a book, and it usually takes me, I don't know, three years, four years, I'm not a fast writer. These people who write a book a year, I'm like, "Whoa, how does that happen?" because I go through these rises and falls of, who am I? What do I know? What? I'm not doing this.

I literally tried to give back the advance for this book because I was talking about women right now, and men, and feminism, and the feminine. It's a very dicey time, the whole gender fluid conversation. "What is gender anyway? Will it even exist? What about people in same sex relationships? What about trans people?" I would have all those people on my shoulders saying, "You can't say that." What about women of color whose struggle is of a level and vastness that I as a privileged white woman can't even really understand their voices are talking to me?

At some point, I had to say, "I am one person with one experience." I'm older than a lot of my readers will be or not be. I'm a white woman. I'm not a man. I'm not gay. I can't speak about each of those voices, I can only speak about what I do.

I gave a speech at a Women in Power Conference about eight months ago, at Omega Institute. My speech was setting off the conference, and Tarana Burke, the founder of the Me Too Movement was going to speak right after me. I gave a talk about the myth of Cassandra. Cassandra was a princess in Troy, it's to Greek myth. She was the most beautiful of all the King's daughters, and all the gods, and all the mortals, all the men wanted her. She was always being wooed.

Apollo, the son of Zeus, wooed her by giving her the gift that everyone wants, prophecy. She could see into the future. He gave her the gift and then he said, "Now you'll repay me by having sex with me," but she wouldn't do it. She didn't want to. He was furious. Instead of just taking away the gift, he spat in her mouth and he said, "You will see into the future, you'll see everything, but no one will believe you."

Slowly over years, she would predict everything. She predicted the war between Greece and Troy, the Trojan Horse, she predicted the downfall of the city, the death of all of her family members, but no one believed her and she slowly began to go mad. At least they said she was mad, but she wasn't mad; she was enraged and grief-stricken that no one would listen to what was going to happen. Then it happened and it was always even worse than she saw.

I told that story at this conference, and Tarana Burke, who represents to me our Cassandra, she's been saying for thirty years, "Little girls, women, young women are being sexually molested, but no one's believing them." This is wounding our culture, everyone. This is a root cause of real wounding and wounding behavior, but no one would believe her. She held to it. She kept saying it and finally, the world caught up to her. Look what's happened because of her, our Cassandra, who the world finally listened to.

I'm telling this story feeling in that like, "I'm just an old white lady telling a story." [chuckles] But I came back, backstage, she was about to go on. I introduced her. She had tears in her eyes and she was like, "That story, that is everything. That story." Then she gave her speech. That was all I needed. That was what I needed to say, just tell your story from your point of view, it will help a few people maybe, some people, forget all those other voices, let them tell their stories. You're not against their stories, but this is yours to tell. That

left me with-- To answer your question, like, “I know some people won’t like it, I know some people will think I’m reducing gender into too small a box, I know some people who will think it’s just a white person’s story.” I bowed to everyone’s opinions, but I just followed my muse, with a little help from Tarana Burke

[laughter]

Mark: Another muse of yours, Toni Morrison. I’d like to ask you about this phrase of hers, “Dream a little before you speak.”

Elizabeth: Think. Before you think.

Mark: “Dream a little before you think.” What does that mean for you?

Elizabeth: Well, I think it’s probably the same for women, men, every gender, but I’m going to speak about it through the lens of women now. We’ve been told that our way of thinking, our way of perceiving and filtering the world is second class, it’s too emotional, it’s this idea that only one form of intelligence is admired in our culture; the logical intelligence that thinks in a straight line and don’t get caught up in emotions. Women have a level of emotional connective intelligence that has not been admired or put forth as admirable or something that a culture would follow. It’s hysterical, it’s too emotional.

Our friend, we both share a friend in Eve Ensler, for years she has said, “I am an emotional creature with pride.” Women think in a way that’s a little more round. Yes, there’s logic in it, there’s rationality in it, there’s feeling in it, there’s connectivity in it. This line from Toni Morrison, who I devote half of the introduction to the book to, because she truly has been a guiding muse for me, because she took the stories of a slice of the culture, the African American experience, and she just decided that’s the voice I am sticking to and I’m going to tell it in all of its glory so that it is a viable voice. It’s not not the white voice, it’s the voice.

The voice of women is often filtered through a rounder way of thinking and that thinking includes stopping and letting yourself dream of what could be before you get caught in, “but that’s just the way it is.” I want women to validate our dreams. If our dreams are like, let’s say, a leader could be more empowering of people, it’s not about one person winning, it’s about more of a collective experience, it’s about care, it’s about elevating care above competition. Yes, there’s competition, but there’s also care. I want women to believe in that dream, that before we think, “That’s just the way it is, I have to be this certain way in this lane that’s viable in our culture,” I want us to validate our dreams. Dream and feel righteous about our dreams.

Mark: Beautiful. What’s the purpose or the importance of the Galatea myth for you?

Elizabeth: Thank you for bringing that myth in. That’s a myth a lot of people don’t know. Again, it was a painting that made me want to bring this into the book. There’s a painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art that I often visit when I’m in New York. It’s of Saint Joan in the garden. It’s enormous. It’s the size of a wall in the Met. I like to sometimes if I have extra time just go sit there on a bench, because there’s hidden angels, spirits, and Joan’s eyes are like blazing. I just love that painting. It gets under my skin. I asked my editor from HarperCollins, we were going to meet and talk about some things, I said, “Let’s meet under the painting of Joan and ask her for inspiration.” I have the editor who would do that. [chuckles]

Mark: Karen?

Elizabeth: Karen. I don't know if other editors would do this. We sat there and then we were leaving and she said, "Yes, but what about that painting?" There's a little painting next to Joan, of Pygmalion. He's from Cyprus, another Greek myth. Cyprus, Troy, Greece, they're all in the myths, and Galatea, a statue. He is kissing the statue and she is coming to life. It's the myth that's been picked up in things like *Pretty Woman* and Eliza Doolittle, where-

Mark: And *Cinderella*.

Elizabeth: *Cinderella*, exactly. Where a powerful man-- Oh, and *Sleeping Beauty*, a powerful man is what the woman is waiting for to give her life and meaning and validity. The sculptor didn't like real women, he thought they were all whores and wanton. Really going back, again, to the sex is sin and it starts with women. He shunned all women, and he locked himself in his sculptor's studio, and he chiseled out of pure white ivory, a perfect woman. A beautiful, pure, innocent, good, obedient woman made of pure white ivory. He fell in love with her and his love was so pure that Venus brought the statue to life. He married her and had children because she was a good woman.

A lot of the myth in the storytelling has to do with her body, her breasts, her figure, and she's on the pedestal. She's white, and she's thin, and she's beautiful. I feel we are under the sway of that myth, women. There is this image on the pedestal that we're all supposed to look like. We're supposed to look like one kind of woman, and if we do, men will love us. It's not just about men, it's culture. Culture influences every kind of relationship, it doesn't have to be heterosexual. We are supposed to look like something. Even when we don't and even when we say, "I don't give a crap, I'm going to look like—" we still do. We're still like, "Oh, maybe this."

Men suffer from it too, but not to the extent that women do. The myth of Galatea, reconstructing that myth is, first of all, taking her off the pedestal, like saying, "Come on down, Galatea." We don't have to be up there. The gaze of someone else is not about our beauty. Make it your own gaze. Look at yourself, see yourself for who you are in your body, in your mind, in your soul. The male gaze, the cultural gaze, it's a prison for women, and it hurts us. It makes us be competitive and unhealthy. That's the myth of Galatea and Pygmalion.

Mark: How does that connect to what you call innervism?

Elizabeth: Oh, well, you really did read the book, Mark.

Mark: Of course, I read your book. [laughs]

Elizabeth: Well, in the last-- The book has three sections and the last section. I've walked these two paths in my life. I know you have too, Mark. I'm a spiritual seeker. I have been since I was a little girl. By that I mean, I firmly believe that any change in the world comes from change within. What's the world? What's society? It's a bunch of us acting out our inner dramas on each other to the extent of our consciousness evolution. We're on the spectrum of crude and cruel to refined and enlightened, and we're all somewhere on that arc, and we're going back and forth, and some days we're better than other days, and some days our unruly, childlike ego prevails, and we're mean, and awful, and slothful, and some days, we're awake and better spirited.

I know that it all starts there and the biggest responsibility is for me to work on me. That's what I call being an innervist, but because I'm also an activist, or I want to be an activist, my intention is to act, to believe this world also needs immediate action sometimes, we can't just wait to become enlightened or none of us will ever do anything. I wanted the last chapter of this book to try to bring together the innervism in me, the spiritual work on self, and this urge to be part of a solution, whether we're an epidemiologist who's trying to find a cure now, or we're a feminist, or we're involved in social justice movements. Whatever our call for action is, and everybody's is different.

Maybe your call for action is just being a better parent, maybe it's serving on your local school board. You don't have to join the United Nations to be an activist. Maybe it's just being a nicer person to your husband, that's the really big challenge. I'm not saying activism, you have to join a movement, but there's a tension in me between-- Look, it's all about finding this inner well of peace, and faith, and love, love of self, of calming the ego, of not needing to be special, being part as opposed to being just one, of prevailing. That's work on the self. That's meditation and working with a therapist, owning your demons, transforming them into good power. That's a lifelong journey and it takes a lot of work, and it's beautiful.

So is having a backbone, that you're not afraid to make huge difference in this world, and not always liked, and not always be good. This, "Yes, I'm going to do it, I have to do it, I have to be brave, just stick my neck out and be brave here." Those two things often are like, "When this? When that? How much of this? How much of that?" The last part of the book is about bringing those two things, innervism, activism, together through practice, through spiritual practice. I do offer a few meditations and different ways to marry those parts of self.

Mark: That's what Joan means when she talks about a soft center and a strong back or a soft front and a strong back?

Elizabeth: This a teacher that both Mark and I really love, Joan Halifax. She's a Zen Roshi master. She has taught for years a practice that she calls strong back, soft front. It's this idea that if your backbone is really strong, and in meditation, your body becomes symbology for being in the world. People say, "What's meditation?" Really? All it is for me, and it's not simple because it's hard, is maintaining this back. That's what yoga is all about, having this sense of the phrase, "I got you, I got your back," you have your own back. You have the sense of, "I am strong. I am noble. I am here," but if that's all you are, you become an asshole, like (roar). At the same time, you have this strong back, but you have this very soft open chest.

Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan teacher, he called it the warrior's heart of sadness. He said, there's not a good translation from Tibetan to English for what he meant by sadness, because it's really more like a heart that is so sensitive that everything touches it. You could cry at any moment about the beauty and the sorrow of the world, but if that's all you are, hm, who could exist?

You have this strong back, with tender heart, and you go out into the world like that, and for me, meditation, that's the practice; strengthens my back, soften my heart, and I sit in the mess of life, and I pray for that balance, that sweet spot between the two. I gave a name to it because my sister, who was a nurse and a very tough character, and my last book was about her. She died a couple of years ago from lymphoma, and I was her bone marrow donor. After she died, I found this needlepoint in her office and it said, because she's a nurse practitioner,

“Do no harm, but take no shit.” That has become the code word for this practice for me, have a strong back and a soft heart.

Take no shit. You’re not going to lose your sense of self and be blown over in a world that tells you you’re not a valid human, so don’t take that shit, but do no harm. Don’t become the very forces we know are destructive. Don’t become a destructive force. I quote this in the book, Friedrich Nietzsche says, “Be careful when battling monsters that you don’t become one.”

Mark: Is that a message for the woman’s movement and for women in power?

Elizabeth: Absolutely. If we just think that women by virtue of our anatomy are the new leaders, the kind leaders, the inclusive leaders, and all you need is a vagina to join, we are sorely misled. Anyone can be corrupted by power. We have a millennia of a caretaking nature, in many ways because we had to have that role, and other ways because it’s true that estrogen does--

I have two men friends who had to be on hormones battling prostate cancer. One of the cures is suppressing the cancer by taking estrogen, suppressing progesterone. Anyway, one of them said to me, “Wow, that year, I was the nicest person I have ever been. I actually wanted to talk to people. It was amazing. Then when I got off it, I just went right back.” So much of who we are our hormones. It just is. You may not want to think that, but it is who we are.

It doesn’t really matter to me anymore, nurture, nature, I don’t care. Women do have in us from nurture and nature, from being deprived of some roles and forced into other roles, we have grooves in our brain that make us more likely to care than to compete, to include than to exclude, but we have to nurture those tendencies in ourselves, believe in them, and the minute we get power, not be seduced into the paradigm that’s been around for a long time or it’ll just be the same.

Mark: Right. Thank you so much, Elizabeth. It’s so great to talk to you. This is such a beautiful book.

Elizabeth: Thank you, Mark. Thanks.

Mark: It’s my pleasure. I’ll see you soon.

Elizabeth: I hope so, in real life.

Mark: In real life. Bye, my dear.

Elizabeth: Bye.

Mark: Bye