

The Seekers Forum Transcript

On Gratitude: An Interview with Mark Wolynn

November 2020



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Mark Matousek: Welcome, Mark Wolynn. It's so good to see you again. Thank you very much for speaking to us today.

Mark Wolynn: Mark, it's always great to see you. Thank you for having me.

Matousek: My pleasure. I wanted to speak to you particularly this month, because it's Thanksgiving, and it's a time when people are going to be coming together often, either virtually or in person with family. You work with family and Family Constellations, you're an expert in that field, so I wanted to start out by asking, what are some of the danger spots or triggers that people coming together with loved ones can be conscious of during this festive time?

Wolynn: Festive, right? That's the key. Being with our family, as we know, when we haven't done our inner work retriggers our early wounds. What many of us don't know is the extent, I would say the prevalence of particularly the mother-child wound. I would say, from what I've observed in my work, that a significant number of us have some facet of a break in the attachment with our moms, whether we've experienced something disruptive in our early relationship with her, or we've inherited this mother wound from our mother's relationship with her mother, our father's relationship with his mother.

What we now know is that this wound passes down in the form of chemical changes in the DNA. One of the most replicated studies in all of that genetics, they separate baby mice from their mothers, and then they observe the biological effects, the molecular changes that are transmitted for three generations.

Matousek: Wow.

Wolynn: Really, a break in the bond with our mother affects so many things, how we feel about ourself, how we feel in our body, in our ability to self-regulate, our feelings of self-worth, self-confidence, our ability to trust life, to receive love from a partner. Really everything from relationships, to health, to how we deal with money and success. For many of us, it remains a mystery why we suffer. That's because the wound often happens so early or passes down invisibly in our DNA that we can't find it.

People often come to me and say, "I'm stuck. There's a piece I've never been able to get to in therapy. No matter how much work I've done, I still don't get better." Or I can't speak up for what I need, or I feel unseen or invisible, or my partner doesn't give me what I need, or I can't be who I am, or I'm dealing with anxiety, depression, money issues, relationship issues, autoimmune issues, Lyme disease. The list goes on.

In answer to your question, what it brings up a lot of tense anxiety, rather than a lot of festive, feel-good energy inside of us. Of course, we need to do our inner work to neutralize the charge we carry in our body before we go back home to be with our family, or we go back home the same old way. We shrink, we tighten, we defend, or we go into some form of reactivity that's not good for them, and it's not good for us.

Even being with our siblings, can rehydrate the mother wound, the feelings we have around what we didn't get from her and what they did get. Or the reverse, the feelings we have around what they didn't get, and then the guilt feelings we have around what we did get. I

often see a pattern of older siblings rejecting younger siblings, feelings of being angry or jealous of the love that the younger sibling got, even if that love was equally limited for everyone.

This makes sense because our hippocampus doesn't come online until around age three when it begins to make connections with our prefrontal cortex, and then we can form cognitive memories. Before that, we have semantic memories that are stored in our body, but often our first cognitive memories can be those of our mom holding our little brother or sister, and then we create a story around it.

Matousek: Right. Coming together with loved ones with all of this background, all of this inheritance, how can we cultivate feelings of gratitude and open-heartedness toward these people?

Wolynn: Yes. Inner work. Again, it's this idea of coming without that charge in our body because if we come in still in the energy of what we didn't get, what they did get, what she did to us, what he did to us, we're not going to be very successful cultivating.

Matousek: Is it true that when we change the story of our trauma and shift our perspective that it helps with healing?

Wolynn: In my work, we often look at what happened behind, say, our mom or a dad that made him drink, made her cruel, made him not see us as his child, made herself-- We use the word self-absorbed. When I hear that, "My mom's self-absorbed," immediately I'm thinking, "Who wasn't absorbed with her? Who didn't center--?" Her mother, our mother's mother, when she couldn't absorb herself with her daughter, her child, and then our mom as a defense become self-absorbed. I like to hear those words. I hear self-centered, well, I think, "Who didn't make their child the center when the child most needed it, and then the child becomes self-centered?"

I look behind at the traumas in my work. What happened to your mom when she was a little girl? What happened to her mom? What blocked the love from her parents? What were her parents experiencing when she was in an important developmental stage? Because until we can peel back the curtain and look behind, we still are charged with the same story. The story, the narrative absolutely needs to change, and we need to bring more information to it.

Matousek: Right. As you're saying this, I'm thinking about your book, *It Didn't Start With You*, when you realize that through your story, there's a backstory.

Wolynn: Always.

Matousek: It changes. That's what shifts the perspective.

Wolynn: Always. Again, I said earlier that so many of us have some facet of the mother-child of breaking the bond, breaking the attachment with our mom. We can't find the stories that created this wound, because all it took was dad to be drinking, mom to feel trapped in her marriage, a baby before us that was miscarried, and then mom couldn't tune in to this pregnancy fearing that she would lose us too, or knowing that she's going to give us away. "I can't keep you, I can't keep you, I can't keep you." As the cortisol floods her body.

We even know from science that the fetus develops a cortisol busting enzyme, just to survive the flow of cortisol from her stress.

These early events, we have to ask questions, and if our parents aren't there to answer it, maybe mom's sister's alive or our first cousin is alive because it's-- I asked people, "Tell me everything you know or have heard from conception to age ten." Well, of course, we don't know anything about what happened to us during conception, but it's significant. Mom's in an arranged marriage, dad feels trapped, they got pregnant out of wedlock. They did the right thing but no one's heart is in it. Mom sees all her future dreams of being a movie star shot, as she's now married to this guy who's not going to fulfill her fantasy. Dad's--

It goes on and on, but we have to look at these early events because they create the most disruption. Again, who drank, who cheated, who didn't want to stay, who felt trapped, who didn't get enough from his or her mother? Because as we know again, from epigenetics, we're looking at three generations separating baby mice. We now know-- Before, the argument was, "But those are mice and we're human." Now the argument is slimming down to the point where we-- For example, the same molecular changes that they're finding in the mice have been separated from their mothers. They either take the mice away for a couple hours a day or they put the mom in a glass tube, stress her out and bring her back to simulate what happens with our mom and our relationship.

They're finding the same chemical changes. The same non-coding RNA changes in the mice, as in humans are triggered. For example, there's this brilliant researcher out of Switzerland, Isabelle Mansuy, who's looking at humans now. Looking at the survivors, for example, of the Nice attack. Remember that guy drives up on the pavement and kills eighty people in his van? She took the blood from the survivors, just as she's been taking the blood from Pakistani orphans who've lost their parents. In other words, have experienced similar upheaval in the earlier years that we might. She's finding the same non-coding RNA changes as the mice that were traumatized in labs. It's slimming now. Now we can say mice, humans, we can get a better picture.

Matousek: Right. That is so interesting. I'd like to ask you a little bit about forgiveness and gratitude, because forgiveness dovetails with what we're talking about, changing the story and finding some space in our hearts. That's how I define forgiveness for the other. [crosstalk] What's the relationship between doing that and being able to be grateful, not only for our lives but for the families that we have?

Wolynn: Again, forgiveness for me, begins with self-work. To hold a position that whatever happened to us happened, and this isn't always easy, happened for us and not against us. Did we gain the ability to speak up? Because we didn't have it prior. Did we gain the ability to form boundaries from the inside before where there were none? Did we learn to pay attention to our body voice? Can we begin to discern a feeling of yes in our body, no in our body, where before we didn't have that access?

From there, once we do this inner work and can live in a core that's rather than fragmented, more fluid, we can take forgiveness outward. Not from a victim place, but from a place of equanimity. A place of having neutralized that charge that we carry in the body. If it's forgiveness that we want to have with our parents, deeper than the words, "Mother, I forgive you," which actually separate us further. Or words like, "Mom, I understand." The words "I forgive you" create more distance. They make us superior, really. They make us bigger than our parents.

Matousek: Exactly.

Wolynn: Deeper are words like, “Mom, Dad, I get it. I really get it.” “Mom, Dad, I understand. What happened wasn’t easy for either of us.” You can feel the difference. Even the way we approach going back for me is always language, but going back to the language of “I forgive you,” way deeper is “I get it, I understand.” Now forgiveness is different if it’s between friends and partners. The movement for me is different. When we’re hurt, we may need to take an action that equalizes. An action of balance is what happened. If you keep showing up late, let’s say, we get together and you keep showing up late every time we’re together, and I keep saying, “Wolynn, I forgive you.” You won’t respect me and there would be no motivation to stop.

Only when I would take an action, “Wolynn, I can’t do this anymore. It doesn’t feel right in my body to keep waiting.” You’d say, “Oh no, I’m going to lose this friendship. Then what happens if I don’t show up on time?” Between peers and people on the same tier. When I’m thinking forgiveness, I’m thinking multiple tiers really. Forgiveness with a parent is different than forgiveness with a partner or a friend. With a friend, again, we need to take some action. We need to balance because that’s the primary step in that situation.

Matousek: Right, but that’s not going to work with parents. That’s not going to work with family, where the relationships are, for want of a better word, they are fixed. It’s a fixed. You get one of them. Things aren’t as negotiable as they are with friends. You don’t do-- Although, I do know people who have fired their families or divorced their parents, for the most part, it’s about living with the part that you’ll never get.

Wolynn: It truly is. The healing with our parents means just as you said, coming to some peace. Being in tune with what we didn’t get, as well as what we did get. Earlier, you asked me about gratitude, I have a lot to say about that really. In our attempt to feel good in our body, to have states of well-being that last, we’ve got to contend with this evolutionary brain that keeps orienting us toward what’s negative. Of course, it does that as a way of protecting us. I’m talking, of course, about our intrinsic negativity bias.

The fact that the amygdala, two-thirds of our amygdala is always scanning for threats, and our limbic brain is always looking for evidence, as you know and as you’re a listener, your viewers know, that it always wants to tell us that the tiger chasing us is real and it’s always right around the next corner. We’ve got to find a way to compete with that, to pull traction away from the amygdala and calm our brains. Our brains can change.

A gratitude practice is for me, the way to do this. Practicing feeling grateful, practicing having a generosity practice, a love and kindness practice, a mindfulness practice. As we know, these types of experiences feed the prefrontal cortex and help us reframe the stress response, so it has a chance to calm down. We talk always about Oprah, always teaching us to have a gratitude practice, we talk about it, but again, like anything else, it’s a muscle, and we’ve got to practice it to get the benefits of it.

Matousek: That makes complete sense. In a time like this when so many people feel burned and scared and angry, it feels like a gratitude practice is particularly essential.

Wolynn: Absolutely essential. What allows us to feel peace, joy, love, strength inside, and then practicing the feelings and sensations of that. What can we do? Again, bringing to inner work, maybe it’s being able to feel this pulsing inside our body, where before, there was just this massive anxiety or being able to stay with this inner unwind or whatever it is that makes us feel-- Then practicing gratitude, it’s the same thing. It’s feeling-- Even mouthing the

words, faking it until we make it. We were taught years ago before we go to bed, think of something that we feel grateful for, but it's really beefing up that muscle. It's strengthening that brain muscle and it's essential.

Matousek: It's essential, particularly, because there's this soul sickness that a lot of people are feeling. It's deeper than political ennui. It's really a fear for the survival of what we consider an ethical civilization. People are looking at the world and feeling so overwhelmed, that the idea of being grateful in a time like this, feels anathema to people. People say, it almost feels irresponsible or as if they're in denial.

I don't see it that way. I really think there's a way of being grateful for our existence as the bottom line. Then, acknowledging what's going on in the mess of the world, but knowing that we are having this extraordinary experience. There's a bottom line gratitude that I experienced and that I know is there behind all of the anxiety and chaos. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Wolynn: Oh, absolutely. I was just thinking lately how, here in my sixties, I have this feeling of well-being, these stages that just seem to stay for long periods of time, which never were the case in my twenties, thirties, and early forties. Being able to appreciate-- Oh man, how to put it? Just being able to appreciate this life we're given, as you said, I think you said it best, this experience that we're given, with all of its quirks and all of its winding roads and dead ends, or what feel like dead ends, and being able to navigate through this to get to the other side. To get to these states where we can have this expansiveness, this emptiness, or I think you said, when you were describing forgiveness is to having this space inside ourselves.

We have to work toward that, but then, to be able to get to these, and the work is worth it, because we're able to get to these places of this space, as you called it, this well-being, and it's truly-- It's nothing feels greater.

Matousek: Nothing feels greater. I don't think there's any antidote powerful enough to what's going on in the world than this kind of existential gratitude.

Wolynn: I agree.

Matousek: We are here. As a friend of mine used to say, it beats the alternative. Really, at the end of the worst day, you can pinch yourself and say, "Yes, but I'm here to meet another day." That is not Pollyanna. It's really an existential gratitude for being.

Wolynn: Absolutely. We're all struggling with the feelings of collective trauma that we're experiencing right now, on all levels from all sides, that again, as we're talking about-- My work is about healing trauma, both inherited and early childhood trauma, but really, it comes down to, for me, to be able to get to this space is-- because these traumas create fragmentations inside our core, fragmentations in our soul.

We talked about soul sickness. Fragmentations in our soul, so to speak, in ways we've split off, or shut down, or numbed out, or tighten not to feel something. We're going through our lives, many of us, with holes in our core. A core that's disconnected from itself, and that keeps us from having access to our full potential.

On the negative side, we can't self-regulate. We can't calm our limbic system when it's activated. Yes, it goes down to that self-work, where we've got to be able to do this inner

work. Have some type of daily practice so we can integrate these fragmentations, to be able to celebrate the positive experiences in our life that we're talking about, because they change the brain. We know that from neuroscience, that's how the brain changes. We have positive experiences, and then we practice the feelings and sensations of the positive experiences, and we change. We actually changed how our DNA expresses, which--

Matousek: It's mind-blowing. Wolynn, I want to ask you a little bit about humility. This is a concept that gets a lot of pushback. I get a lot of pushback from students around humility. Particularly, I have to say women who said they spent their whole lives trying to feel equal to and find parity with the world, and they don't want-- Humility, to them is about being small. That's, of course not what humility is about in a spiritual sense. I think they're confusing humility with humiliation. Can you say something about the relationship between humility and well-being and gratitude?

Wolynn: I like how we put the word small with humility because there is a way in which we are small in this massive vortex of events, and experiences, and pain, and accusations, and blah-blah-blah, but when we can stay small, we stay open. Humility in and of itself, there's no conclusion in humility. We're just open to what's happening. When we conclude something out of a defense, we've blocked all other opportunities, all other paths because we think we know, or we're striving to become equal, or it almost becomes a bravado in us to know. This not knowing is this being small in the face of everything is the real hugeness, because in not knowing, we know much more, I guess, is the way that I can say it. When I work-- [crosstalk]

Matousek: Sorry, go ahead.

Wolynn: Even when I work with people, I can walk in with all my theories, but it's that Jungian phrase, "Learn your theories well, but when you sit in front of the magnificence of a human being, forget everything you know and don't know anything." You don't know and you sit there completely open to-- It's almost, "Teach me. Teach me." Then, we don't conclude. We sit in this state of, I love the word, yes, humility, small. We sit small.

Matousek: When you're in that state, you can feel gratitude because you're not entitled, you're not privileged, and your expectations aren't oversized. You understand the limitations of life and of who you are, as you say, our scale in the universe, and you become grateful for the small things in life. It's such a cliché but it really is the path. That's, I think, what the pandemic has done for people, it's grounded people. It's made them small. It's made them look around at their immediate lives and be home with their lives metaphorically and literally, and learn to love that. That's a profound spiritual practice.

Wolynn: I couldn't agree with you more. There's nothing even to add to that.

Matousek: Do you see love of family as a kind of spiritual practice?

Wolynn: Oh, absolutely. You see, we can't choose our family. We come into this world however we come in from, whatever we come in from, with the wounds, and the competitiveness, and the angers, and the frustrations, the reactivity, the events, the numerous events, again, that create that mother-child attachment break, and breaks with our father, and disconnections with our siblings.

I've always pushed, as you know I do in my book, this idea, if we can heal that, we're not walking around with a template. Because again, our parents are a template for life, particularly our moms. It's a template for life, environment. If there were insults to the early environment to the womb, she spotted, she almost lost the pregnancy, she's stressed, Dad's drinking. Whatever the story is, later, we come out into the world fractured by our environment. There were smells, and sounds, and noises, and we develop heightened sensitivity to food, particularly, heightened sensitivities to our environment. We want to break these templates of our early environment, so we don't keep repeating the blueprint of what happened when we were small or what we brought in from epigenetics.

Yes, the answer is absolutely spiritual practice. Can we take something from what we were given with acknowledging what we weren't given? Again, hold it against spiritual practice? Hold it in a way, "I did not get this and I consent," rather than, "I didn't get this and I should have had that." Because we have this sense of, all of us really, have this sense of, "I should have had that." Really? Why should you have had that? In a sense, because it's those breaks, those wounds that create our-- We talked about this earlier, but the pathways through the windy roads, that what look like dead ends, that create our greatness, that create our wisdom. Wisdom isn't given, it's found.

[laughter]

It's found, but we need to come from somewhere to be able to earn it. When we ask about love and finding again love for our siblings and parents, I'm all for it, because it is a way to erase, again, that template, that blueprint, those fragmentations, that early nightmare that keeps informing our current life.

Matousek: Beautiful. Just one more question. David Steindl-Rast, the wonderful Benedictine monk, is always talking about gratitude changing everything, and that we need to create a network of grateful living for our civilization to continue. What would a network of grateful living look like to you?

Wolynn: Hm. Again, every time I answer a question, I'm always starting with inner work, right? First, we have to be able to find our body as an ally, as peaceful, as a resource, as a place we can inhabit that doesn't feel inhospitable. Then we can get to those places inside ourselves that, "Wow, this just being here with myself feels opening and good." We develop these states, again, these states that feed the prefrontal cortex, like gratitude and generosity. We find them first in ourselves and then, we can-- At least this is my personal experience, finding it first internally, and then looking around and being grateful for--

Now as I look outside, I'm looking at this beautiful mountain in front of me, and these gorgeous manzanita trees, and these squirrels and these quail. There are so many quail outside my window, and this family of deer that live on my land. I just feel so grateful every day for every thing, but I didn't have that as a young man whose body felt inhospitable. Now, when my body is hospitable-- Am I using those words right? Yes.

Matousek: Yes.

Wolynn: [chuckles] Now, when my body is an oasis or a resource. I look around and my body, what's in is what's out. My body in and out there, it's the same thing. For me, a network of grateful living is being grateful for everything that stands in front of us, everyone,

everything, and the differences between us, because that's, of course, what we're seeing globally right now or at least nationally.

We're looking at, here we are, our fellow brothers and sisters. They feel different things than we are, and it's creating splits in us. Again, for me, that's taking us back to our early split, so we don't have humility, we don't have smallness, we have position. We stand with position against the other, rather with that smallness of curiosity. Again, curiosity is another state that feeds the prefrontal cortex and allows us to reframe that stress response. Let's put all those words into a big bowl.

Matousek: [chuckles] Exactly. What I hear you saying is that until you're at home in your own body, until you do that work, you can't create any kind of network with another person. You've got nothing to offer and you're not receptive. Is that accurate?

Wolynn: I am, but I'm also hearing you say that and I'm also interested in this idea. As you were talking, I'm thinking, "What if I've not done any inner work, but I have this practice outside of me?" Well, that will then create the inner work, because again, as we're talking this through, I love it, because if my practice is, even though my body could feel strain, and stress, and anxiety, but I have a practice of tenderness or a generosity practice, where each day I go out and I open myself to my vulnerability, my tenderness toward others, my curiosity toward others, even though my body is a nightmare inside were it to be, it would work the other way as well. Just having an outward generosity practice would create inward states of well-being.

Matousek: Wow. I think we'll leave it there. That's one beautiful way to end. Thank you so much, Mark.

Wolynn: Oh Mark, it's always a pleasure to be with you.

Matousek: It's great to be with you. I'll send you the links and all kinds of things. Just take good care of yourself, my friend. I hope we see each other again in the body.

[laughter]

Wolynn: I hope so too, Mark. I'll look forward to it.

Matousek: Me too, Mark. Take care. Bye.