

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Way of the Phoenix: An Interview with Rabbi Andrew Harvey

January 2021



Mark Matousek: Andrew, I'm so happy to see you.

Andrew Harvey: So lovely to be with you. Hooray.

Mark: Thanks. Welcome to The Seekers Forum.

Andrew: I love to be there.

Mark: Thanks. We did a book together twenty-five years ago and I just want to read something from it that you said and start with this. You said, "Our unwillingness to face the extremity of the situation is part of the problem. The facts of our global crisis, a crisis that is at once political and economic, psychological, and environmental, show us clearly that the human race has no hope of survival unless it chooses to undergo a total change of heart, a massive quite unprecedented spiritual transformation." [crosstalk] So I want to ask you, how are we doing?

Andrew: We're doing very, very, very badly.

[laughter]

Andrew: We are failing the grade, but it may be that the failure itself is part of the plan. That we're meant to fail so spectacularly and to be so savagely deconstructed by what's exploding everywhere that we will be driven to undergo something I believe now is more than a transformation, it's really a mutation, a transfiguration of one species into another. Because as we are, it's absolutely clear we're incapable of dealing with the crisis we've manifested from our hubris. They're exploding everywhere, we're failing every single one of them with a panache that would be noble if it wasn't so narcissistic and self-absorbed and streaked with denial. It is desperately sad.

Mark: Hm, hm. Yeah. You talk about living free of both despair and hope, what do you mean by that?

Andrew: Well, I'd love to give a personal example. I had a very long and complicated relationship with my mother, but at the end of her life, we'd reached an Entente Cordiale, France had met England, did a few tables, and being polite over wine and that kind of thing. We'd really come to love each other. Then she got dementia and there wasn't any room for despair because she needed to be looked after. There wasn't any room for hope because it's absurd to imagine that an eighty-nine-year-old woman who'd smoked and drank too much all her life would suddenly recover from dementia and go on tour with Jane Goodall. That's not what's going to happen.

What I discovered from that experience is that there is a force much greater than either despair or hope, and that's love, turning up in full presence of love. Whatever happens is the key to liberation, the key to personal joy, and the key to living a truly meaningful life that's irradiated by divine inspiration. So, when people come to me and say, "I need hope," I say to them, "No, you don't. You haven't discovered who you are yet."

Because when you discover who you are, you discover that you're deathless, that you've never been born, you'll never die, you have the foundation of divine consciousness as an original blessing. It's not something you read about in books, it's something that has happened to you. So you're living it and you're living it normally, humbly, ordinarily, simply, and it is astounding, it changes everything.

From that place, you don't need to hope. You're having the experience nakedly, directly, of love, loving you, and loving love back in your mind, heart, soul, and body, and in love various theaters that it puts you in and all the different people that you meet who are yourself that love reflects back to you.

Mark: Hope implies duality that doesn't really pertain when you realize what you actually are?

Andrew: Right. Also, hope may block certain powers from being released in you. Which will be kept back so long as you think that God will do it for me or the human race is going to have a massive transformation, it's going to organize economic and climate change and all the rest of it. That actually stops you from taking a knife to your own self-imprisonments and just bashing them or stabbing them open so that the great power and radiance within you can flow out anyway. We live in such a materialistic mercantilist, "You give me this, I'll give you that," kind of culture. All transactional.

That hope has become a kind of transaction with ourselves and with the world that prevents us from living in the lavish splendor of a life that's giving for the sheer beauty of giving, for the sheer rapture of loving. Not because you've got six steps to the salvation of the planet, not because if you really turn up in the movement and pay me a thousand dollars a month to teach you how to turn up in the movement, you will be able to liberate the world.

Not because of those things, but because there's nothing else truly worth doing in a time in which extinction is possible and the human race is behaving badly and madly and needs desperate help.

Mark: Emerson talked about chanting the beauty of the good. He said, "Don't waste time barking against the bad, chant the beauty of the good." I think he's talking about the love that you're describing.

Andrew: I think he is, but I think it's more what Rumi is really speaking of and the mystics of love are speaking of. Is that we are here to experience the most shattering, amazing love. Blake put it best when he said, "We're put on earth, a little space, to learn to bear the beams of love." It's a lovely pun because it's both the intense light, but it's also the responsibilities to carry the beams, to carry the cross of love. The responsibility to tell the truth, the responsibility to honor justice, the responsibility not to betray the grandeur and the nobility of the one you are in love with, the beloved.

For me, it's not been about chanting the praise of the good, it's been about experiencing radically in every part of myself the absolutely unimaginable love of God for us, for myself, for everybody, for every human being. For that original blessing that is fermenting and growing in us, that is love spark given to us to live our lives with. My whole life was a search for that, and it's no longer a search, I found it. It's found me. I finally let myself be found.

That has changed everything for me because once you find that love and it becomes your daily feast, hope is irrelevant because that's the only reality that ever was and ever will be. The reality that you're in is not going to go away when you die. It's not going anywhere, you're in it. The scenery will change but the consciousness would be the same.

Mark: Your new book, *Radical Regeneration* is a radical book. It's full of activism, it's full of engagement with the world, and argument with what's going on. Are you saying that when

we start from that foundation of love then we can engage with the world in a way that is actually going to awaken and open and free ourselves from the –

Andrew: I feel so. I feel that you know from your own life, and we all know from our own lives, and you know from the lives of so many other people we all both know, is that you can only gaze deeply and darkly into the shadow enough considering how high you've gone. You can only really have the courage to face the unspeakable cruelty and madness and horror that's actually part of all of our shadows, in front of the human shadow, when you have tasted enough of your divine consciousness. So that you're not terrified by an unloved ego of actually acknowledging the depths of the cruelty and savagery that lives inside you.

The danger of shadow work, which is the key to everything in our time it seems to me, done from a Freudian or even an intelligent union perspective, is that fundamentally what they're doing is trying to rearrange the furniture of the ego in a way that doesn't drive you totally crazy so that you don't axe-murder your mother or rape your daughter or throw your lover out of the window.

That seems to be the highest dream of that project. The reality is that's far, far too small. Because as your mind expands into super consciousness you realize that you have the deathless self from which to work on your shattered, traumatized, broken human self. You have a mother to work on your own child. You have someone, something, some presence that is plugged in directly to all the powers of the universe to direct those powers to the savage wounds and the lacerations and the madnesses that have so disfigured all of our lives.

That's the most astounding discovery. Once that's installed, and only love can install it because only love can give you something that utterly amazing and give you the skills and the knowledge, once that's installed you know that whether the world works or not, what you have to do is to turn up in that love. You know that if you're living in that love and in that presence you're far more able to deal with the utter unspeakable intensity of this completely horrifying, and potential terminal crisis.

If you're still hopeful that humanity is going to suddenly fall on its knees and beg for transfiguration and it'll all go on as it's supposed to go on, we'll all be happy and die in our beds at ninety-four, you're utterly out of your mind. You're not able to help anyone however noble and optimistic and self-righteously grand your hope may sound to be and however many times it gets you on Oprah.

It's not going to be of any bloody use because what you need in a crisis like this of people who could see the very worst, the most horrific thing without being shaken and paralyzed and still radiating tenderness. By their lives showing that they're willing to live out their lives for justice, compassion, and love whether or not anything changes out of sheer breviary for God, nobility of the soul.

I'm sick to death with the whole American spirituality, which has become so mercantile and all about cheering people up. As if it's been of any use to cheer people up. Look how appallingly they've behaved, look how they've supported fascist regimes, look how they have refused to help the poor. Look how they don't give a Tinker's fart for the collapse of the climate. That's what cheering up people gets you to.

What we need is realism, and that's what this book really does present. Because it's real in inviting us to look at two unprecedented opposites which have never danced together in our

history. On the one hand, the prospect of real extinction. Scientists in London met on December the 7th, major scientists with major environmental scholars, hundreds of them, and what they discussed wasn't how much we need to change, they discussed when are we going to really get down to prepare for collapse, unprecedented collapse?

That's one side, and on the other side, as you know from the book, we have an evolutionary vision opening up to us through the great evolutionary mystics, which has never been more glorious. Which is saying to us one species is finished, you can see that, and there'll be an agony in between.

If you can align yourself with the laws of that agony, if you can surrender, if you can love, if you can give up your concepts, and your false hopes and your fantasies and your narcissism and you believe that you're in control, then grace will shape you and strengthen you. Build in you a wholly different foundation, which will liberate you from your absurd lives that you're living now and give you a wholly new vision of divine embodied humanity.

The real experience that Rumi had, and Jesus had, the experience of not just having divine consciousness but of grounding that divine consciousness in mind, heart, and body. Therefore transforming the powers of the species to co-create with the divine, both. On the one hand, total extinction, and on the other hand, unprecedented transformation, transfiguration.

We have nothing to help us hold those two opposites together, except the very great mystics who have known how to at different levels of intensity and are behind us as we come to the moment where we have to bring their wisdom together. We have to have all the wisdom beyond hope that the shadow can give us. We have to have all the wisdom beyond hope in the eternal, this is always true, of the love. Of the radiant, elevated, exalted vision of embodiment of transfiguration. That's what the book is about. It's a map for how you bring these two tensions together and how you live in the unfolding of the first, the truth of the second.

Mark: That leads right into what I wanted to ask you next, which is what are the major misunderstood things about mysticism? It's one of the most overused words now the new age has co-opted in so many ways. What are the big misses that people really don't understand about the power of mysticism?

Andrew: Well, I think the first one is that it's somebody special in mystic. Everyone is a mystic in the closet because everyone is born with divine consciousness. The second thing is that mystical consciousness is actually a special kind of consciousness. You have many different experiences and very extraordinary states of consciousness, but true awakening is realizing that you're already in the deepest consciousness, which is sober, calm, spacious, holds all things. That's already installed.

The mystic isn't looking for something, the mystic is undertaking a journey to find out what he or she is already. That's the second-grade misconception. The third-grade misconception, which belongs very much to our time, is that if the first two are right then we don't have to do any real work because we're already mystiques. I'm a mystic, you're a mystic, you're already a mystique consciousness. That's the rub.

Because as the Sufi said, there are 70,000 veils between you and you. Between the person who's trapped in a human film, condemned to a dying human body, condemned to a fantasy of being Andrew or Mark. There's a great difference in perception between that person and

someone who knows, like Pramana knew or Arvinda knew or [unintelligible 00:16:47] knew, that they were the entire enchilada living its sublime experience through them.

That is, there are 77,000 delusions to be bent down, 77,000 veils to be annihilated, which is why the classical mystical systems are so important. Because they understand those stages and they enable you. You study them deeply with your own experience to stay radically humble so you can be given more, and more, and more. So that you don't get fixed in any understanding of what a mystic is by simply thinking you're already in the consciousness that you need to be and not going through the multiple stages and ordeals that will unfold if you commit yourself radically to a path of secretly austere discipline.

Mark: This doesn't need to be an institutionalized discipline of any kind?

Andrew: No.

Mark: It can be the direct non-dual path that doesn't have to be about practices necessarily or do you think--

Andrew: It can be. I think it's very dangerous if it isn't about practices, and yet practices have that dangerous practices, that you get so addicted to practices and to feeling good about yourself for doing them and through the experiences the country practices that you stay happily playing in the sandpit and don't claim your full divine realization. The danger of the other path is that you never, ever allow yourself to meet or read or take in stages beyond where you've come to. You have a danger of great self-complacency and self-satisfaction about where you've come to.

I think for all of us, there's a balance that we need to find between being grateful for where we've come, but also having so deep and rich, and not erudite, but schooled sense of what's at stake in this adventure. Which can only really come from contemplating the prophet or Jesus or the great ones who have exploded, like supernovas, and forever given us staggering examples of what's possible. To keep alive to those outrageous possibilities is also important because otherwise, you stop too short of your own transfiguration.

Mark: It's about finding what works for you. Finding what your particular temperament is, how your particular animal works, and that's a lifelong process.

Andrew: Yes. I think you know fairly early, we were just saying before, we were talking on this broadcast, we were saying that it's extraordinary how many, how simple the themes around richer life is organized as you come to the end of it, as you come to see what it's-- I think people have a strong sense of what can really guide them forward on the path.

Whether they want a path that is very rich and multi-textured-- It's like a cuisine. Which cuisine do you want? Do you want lean Japanese food or do you want Hindu food or do you want Turkish food? Do you want lots of spices and vegetables? Because you can have the path in any of those ways. It's the mother has cooked the most fabulous set of feasts for the human race, which one are you going to sit down on? It's the one that will appeal to your particular emotional comic palette. At different times in your life too I think that-

Mark: That's what I was going to say, it changes.

Andrew: - it does change.

Mark: It definitely changes. I'd just like to ask you, you put forward a five-point plan of self-awareness, which I think is absolutely genius. I'd just like you to just comment briefly on each of the five steps.

Andrew: Well, I'd love that. If you'd read them out, that'd be wonderful.

Mark: The first one is that life is hard.

Andrew: Stop believing that any kind of life that you could call meaningful would not be at times extremely difficult. Accept the hardness of life as part of the blessing of life, that's the key. Because if you want to go beyond duality, the first thing you're going to have to need to do is to reframe ordeal or suffering or anguish or defeat or betrayal. You're going to have to need to reframe them, and that's going to be incredibly hard because it's going to crucify the ego.

You're going to have to give up your sense that you deserve protection from anything, and that those things are harmful, because they're all part of the way in which God's alchemy works. Chaos and horror and anguish are just as much God's words as joy and peace and calm. Your only hope of coming into a naked, frank, face-to-face relationship with reality is to realize two things which are interlinked, reality and God are one. Reality has absolutely sickening, disgusting, terrifying, nakedly destructive faces, which are just as divine as the ones that your ego happens to find pleasant.

Mark: I love what Matt Fox says, "That we live in a beautiful world, not a pretty one."

Andrew: Exactly. Real beauty has blood all over it, as we know.

Mark: The second point is that you are not important.

Andrew: This is very difficult for me as you can imagine.

[laughter]

Andrew: This is something the Dalai Lama says all the time, and he says it so beautifully, especially saying it as him. He said, "Look, if you just take yourself out of this room," I'll never forget him doing this in the Beacon Theater, 5000 people, the Dalai Lama, amazing occasion. He said, "If I just took out myself out of this room, you'd all be here. You're all very important people." He said, "I'm not important, but if I took you out of this room, everybody else would be here. They are all much more important than you."

That's the beginning, but I think in the deepest sense what it's saying is that if you live in the ego you construct a journey for your life that makes your life central basically, to the whole future of humanity. Without your life flowering in the exact way that you planned, making you whatever, fabulously rich, famous, whatever it is, the world will grind to a devastating halt quite soon.

[chuckling]

Andrew: This is the most absurd, ridiculous, absolutely ludicrous fantasy. It makes people behave very, very, very, badly, which thank God, neither of us have done because we've been perfect in every conceivable way but which we all know other people to have done. Are you

kidding me? The mistakes that I've made through that fantasy, the mistakes we all make, most of the evil of the world comes from that.

Really facing that you are not important, that as you think of yourself now, you're actually a deluded maniac in a lunatic asylum who needs radical healing by the light. Which will not make you up to be important, because the miserable thing about awakening is that you know that you are god, but you discover horrifically, that everybody else is also god too, that you're not special or more God than anybody else. This is very annoying.

I remember having an experience like that early on in my life, in [unintelligible 00:24:38] we'd been together. Walking on the sand and looking at my footprints, and they were, thank God, glowing with divine light, and I said, "Well, probably the Buddha or Jesus didn't come this far, poor things, but now I'm here."

[chuckling]

Andrew: Then I saw that all the other footprints had like two. I hate to say it, but I was only twenty-six, and I was very miffed.

[chuckling]

Andrew: I've grown out of that now. I think that's if we're honest, that is the single most devastating thing about the mystical path. Is to show you, A, you don't exist as you think. See, if you did exist as you thought you were you'd be a complete catastrophe, even more than you have been. Third, it's totally incredible how inflated your idea of your own importance is when you look at the world with all these brilliant, tragic, self-defeating, self-promoting people, all scrambling in this crazy-- you think you're important? Are you kidding me?

Mark: [chuckles] The third is that your life is not about you. Can you say something about that?

Andrew: Well, if you go deeper into the meaning of the authentic self what you discover is that it has two facets which are really seemingly paradoxical. One is that you wake up to being that. You wake up to the experience of knowing that the consciousness that is seeing and smelling and living through you, holding up your hands, is nothing else than the consciousness that is sustaining and creating all things at all times. It's the same consciousness, you just happen to be the Japanese mask that it's wearing for this performance, for this second appearance. Like it's doing Mark for me, and it's doing Andrew for you.

That's the first recognition but then there's another one which is really in the way the recognition of the mother, the recognition that the mother gives. The father gives that recognition of the light, the origin. The mother says, you think you exist as a separate-self from all other-selves, but in reality, your own deepest experience of your own self comes through relationship. Comes through subtle, complex, deep, painful, tragic, warring, harmonious relationship. Because you're having a relationship with all the different aspects of yourself through all the selves you need.

Without knowing that, and without cultivating the humility and the unknowing knowing and the rapture that you have when you meet another aspect of yourself that you've never met

before, a Trump, for example, you-- We'll leave that for a second. Without knowing that you don't cultivate the kind of endless curiosity and radical openness that you need to live the truth in divine light.

It's both sides. The grandeur and majesty of the deathless consciousness, but the endless curiosity and exploratory sweetness of the one who knows that everyone who's coming towards him, or her, is a part of his or her in herself to be greeted, to be respected, to be learned from, to be integrated. His holiness is very much like that. He said it to me once, he said, "Everyone is part of me. So I'm just meeting me." He said it very jokingly but it was a revelation.

Because as it grows in you, that consciousness, it becomes more and more wonderful. Relationship becomes the way in which you establish your progress because this is such a beautiful thing in, **John Paul II** diaries. Towards the end of his life he says, on Christmas day he says, "I've got to think about myself. I don't have much time to think because I'm so busy being Pope," but he says, "I must have grown humbler because people love me so much more."

I think that's such an incredibly humble sentence. It's a revelation of that second kind of relationship, isn't it? If you truly are in the self, and all selves are aspects of yourselves and you're paying deepest interconnected tender attention, then you're going to be far more loving and far more loved.

Mark: The fourth is that you're not in control.

Andrew: Oh, yes. [chuckles] All I can tell you is a story again about myself about this. Because about ten years ago I went to South Africa with a great friend of mine, one of my greatest friends. He turned up in the morning, and I was going for a walk with him with the white lions, and I said to him, I said, "Neil, I have never felt better in my whole life. I mean, my health is perfect." [chuckles]. And he's used to me, so he'd say, "Oh, how wonderful, et cetera." Well, that [day] at twelve o'clock I had a massive gallbladder attack.

Mark: Oh, **shit**.

Andrew: At one o'clock, I was in a taxi going to a clinic called Zanim, which is one of the scarier places on Earth. I was in a taxi and I was dying, I knew I was dying. I was a little miffed also because I wanted to die-- you know me, you know how I'd like to die to medieval music or **Calasso, my cat arranged**, but I was dying in a filthy cab with rap music in the most ordinary street in South Africa you could imagine.

I thought, "You could have done it better than this for all you've put me through," laughing. At that moment I didn't feel any fear because I didn't leave my body and I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I became one with everything, very simply, and I knew that there is no death. That's not the point. The point is that in that morning I believed that I was the healthiest I'd ever been. We have no idea what karma is **[unintelligible 00:31:18]** any moment, and anybody who says they do is deluded. Staying on your knees expecting anything and being ready for anything, humbly, seems to be the best policy.

Mark: Absolutely. The last one, which is implied in everything you've been saying, is that you're going to die. Why is that important to a healthy, balanced, wise way of living?

Andrew: In the end, it makes you so much more compassionate, doesn't it? Because you realize that-- what is so important that you're going to keep up your grievances or your resentments or your story or whatever it was that somebody did to you in 1985 when both of you and all of us are going into the dark? Why don't we turn our attention to forgiveness? To celebration and to communion and to being of the most possible help to the others that have so small of a space on the earth? Isn't it that?

Mark: Oh, absolutely.

Andrew: I think that's the fundamental shift. It doesn't come early or easy to any of us, I don't think, that shift, does it?

Mark: No. [crosstalk].

Andrew: It's one of the great advantages and joys, I feel, of being this age. I've never been happier and never been doing more and never loved more and never felt more loved and never felt more creative and never felt more genuinely useful. I've never felt happier producing a new book like *Radical Regeneration*. Because I know it can be of real use to people as they face the unspeakable.

Mark: It's a very powerful book. I love all of your work always and I'm just so thrilled that you could spend time with us today.

Andrew: Of course. Of course. God bless your work and God bless everybody out there. Good luck everyone.

Mark: Thank you. Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew: She's planning your feast you just have to get through the first courses.

[laughter]

Mark: I love you.

Andrew: I love you my darling.

[00:33:45] [END OF AUDIO]