**The Seekers Forum Transcript**

# Becoming Yourself: An Interview with Natalie Goldberg

**February 2021**

THE SEEKERS FORUM
*Inquire Within*

[music]

**Mark Matousek:** Hello, everyone, and welcome to this month's edition of The Seekers Forum. Before we begin, let's just have a moment of silence together to gather our thoughts and prepare ourselves for the talk and the writing ahead. Whenever you're ready, just gently close your eyes, take a couple of deep breaths in and out through the nostrils, and we'll just sit for one minute together, please.

**[pause 00:00:48]**

**Mark:** After your next exhalation, gently open your eyes and come into the room in soft focus. Welcome and welcome, Jay. How are you, Jay?

**Jay Koebele:** Hello, Mark. It's my favorite Sunday of the month. Thank you.

**Mark:** Great, good to see you. Last month we were looking at regeneration and self-renewal. We were talking about the different kinds of self, the different layers of self that we are focusing on. This question of self-renewal and what is the self has grown a lot more complicated in the age of virtual reality, image-making, image promoting. The ability to fake it and to create personae that really have no bearing on who we actually are is very much on the rise. The truth is that we need public and private lives that can sometimes run on parallel tracks these days and offer temptations for fakery, wherever we go.

Today, we're going to be looking at originality and authenticity on the spiritual path in this age of imposterhood. Bill Maher, who is a wonderful commentator, has a great way of describing this split between reality and virtual reality. He says, "We now live two lives. There's the real us, the person in the kitchen or a bar who speaks like a human with trusted friends, and then there's what we call our avatar. Our avatar looks and sounds like us, but it's not really us. It's the persona we adopt in any public sphere, which now includes followers on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and so on. Americans today crave any kind of authenticity because our avatars are just so full of it. Everyone's social media persona is now like a candidate running for office, holding babies, doing photo ops. Facebook should really be called Two-Facebook. In movies, avatars are more interesting versions of ourselves flying around doing whatever they want, but your avatar on Facebook isn't better or stronger or faster than you are. It's just prettier. Its great superpower is that it remembers birthdays."

I love that. That was a good way of encapsulating just how false our online selves can be and how tempting it is now to fracture ourselves into different versions of who we want to be seen as. What's known as imposter syndrome is, of course, epidemic. Imposter syndrome is defined as a psychological pattern in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments, and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud, regardless of external achievements, despite their evidence of their competence. People who experience the imposter syndrome remain convinced that they are frauds and that they don't deserve what they have achieved.

Today, there's another facet of the imposter syndrome that grows from this fertilizer of self-doubt and this has to do with creating a virtual self, intended to bolster our lack of self-esteem. A virtual self that shores up, neutralizes feelings of inauthenticity by allowing us to be outwardly intimate and share endlessly with the world in order to feel visible to others and therefore real.

It reminds me of the title of one of Norman Mailer's non-fiction collections *Advertisements For Myself*. We live in the age of advertisements for myself. The electronic era invites us to become our own self-promoters, marketers, and sometimes even hucksters. In truth, our public lives are at risk of turning into billboards devoted to impressing others, to extending our reach, and to increasing our likes in this perpetual global popularity contest that we find ourselves in. Rather than bolstering self-confidence, this campaign of ego expansion actually increases loneliness, competition, and an unhealthy kind of self-consciousness.

In the happiness paradox, as it's known, it shows that people who use social media are proportionately unhappy in terms of how much they find themselves online. Data show that people today report feeling much, much less authentic than they did in the past when we lacked all of these avenues to become imposters and really relied on face-to-face connection to forge our human bond, and to be able to come together and connect more meaningfully and have a sense of ourselves that's rooted in connection to others, which of course we don't have when we're online, despite the fact that we have many, many connections and many, many friends, we're of course not experiencing that face-to-face, one-on-one tactile connection that grounds us as human beings.

Depression rates were already high before this pandemic forced us into isolation. We've learned that as wonderful as Zoom is and Skype, it's great that we have these means, virtual contact is never enough. It doesn't replace that 3D interaction which settles our anxieties and grounds us and helps us to feel more real. Also, these tools of self-obfuscation, these tools of imposterhood, these many ways of falsifying ourselves, play on our worst instincts and our worst insecurities. Bullying, scamming, manipulation, trolling, and misrepresenting who we are.

The illusion of authenticity actually provides ground cover for dishonesty and exploitation. In other words, we can seem to be enormously self-revealing, transparent, and intimate while actually using it as a coverup for what's really going on with us and who we actually are. Think about reality TV. Viewers are supposedly given an unvarnished access into other people's private lives, but like audiences at a magic show, they're never told the tricks of the trade. In fact, that these shows are largely scripted, they're rehearsed, many of the on-screen situations that we witness have been edited and revised for dramatic effect. Instead of reality, we're actually offered fantasy representations of lives that we believe we're witnessing in the raw.

This illusion intersects with this growing phenomenon that we now call alternative facts. Alternative facts. This is a whole new subset of reality that has set in over the last few years in the political world and is actually spreading into other areas of our lives. According to the law of alternative facts, truth is a relative, malleable thing with no final empirical bottom line. Reality itself is subject to multiple choices, to cherry-picking, and to outright denial. It can be edited to satisfy different demographics, for different goals, and at different times with shocking impunity, as we've seen in our social discourse over the last few years. This distortion and smearing are no longer real.

Of course, we know that millions of people subscribe to alternate facts without any apology, and they revel in the ability to do so, to live in this realm of fake results, which of course they believe is real. Video manipulation can be used to fracture reality even further. A little bit of editing or slow down a video and you can make an eloquent person sound drunk, you can make a scoundrel sound virtuous.

The effect of this ability to shift reality, to alter our impressions of reality is extremely demoralizing and dispiriting. In fact, it is offensive. When we realize that reality itself can be manipulated so shamelessly to serve ideological agendas, it can lead to a terrible sense of malaise, as we know from cults and authoritarian regimes where disconnection from reality is used to brainwash members and to suppress the gullible masses.

When it no longer matters how you win as long as you do, and when the ends justify the means, civilization begins to decline and spiritual sickness is on the rise. It's as if vertigo hits us when the world tilts this way, and when it gets out of kilter. It's like Yeats said in his wonderful poem, *The Second Coming,* "Things fall apart; The centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity." Isn't that great? "Things fall apart; The centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity."

This vertigo that's caused when reality tips and splits and informs alternative versions of itself leads to spiritual nausea described by the existentialists. It's this sickening anxiety before the unpredictable shifts of an uncontrollable universe. Unable to find solid philosophical ground, we begin also to doubt our own integrity, and this is where the rubber hits the road. It becomes harder to be fully human. We begin to confuse ourselves with our own social avatar. The difference between the two, between this invented self and the true self, becomes harder to distinguish.

It's harder to tell the difference between what's authentic and original and natural and spontaneous, and what is imitative, concocted, and transactional. This is so important. We live in a hyper-transactional age when it feels like everything and everyone is up for sale. When the thing you're bartering is yourself, your image, the truth of who you are, you may have entered into a pact with the devil. This can extend from big things, dramatic things, to smaller things that are acceptable but questionable.

For example, I know a guy who is into online dating. He lies about his age on this dating site, he has for years. He shaves ten years off of his life. I asked him, "Why do you do it?" He said that if people knew that he was in his sixties, it would damage his love life. He'd get a fraction of the online contact from people that he wanted to date. I asked him, "Why do you want to date people who wouldn't like you for who you are?" He appreciated that. He appreciated the point intellectually, but he rejected it emotionally. Meaning that while he couldn't deny the empirical truth of the falsehood, there was another truth that it covered up. That was the truth that if he lies, he can have what he wants, and if he doesn't, he believes that his love life is going to suffer. That truth for him, that emotional experiential truth for him is more important than the ultimate empirical truth that he is lying about his age. While he knows that he's wrong to present alternative facts, he also says that it's acceptable because it helps him to meet younger people.

Now, I'm the last person to judge other people's dating habits. That's not what this is about, but I couldn't overlook the obvious either. That is that my friend's willingness to misrepresent himself also reflects his terror of aging, his loneliness, his vanity, his intermittent depression. Also, his cynicism and a deep doubt, which is shared by many people that what really matters in the end is getting as much as you can, while you can, however you can, while you're here in this brief span on the planet.

My friend is an otherwise upstanding citizen, but like many, he's willing to sacrifice reality, a measure of his integrity if it gets him what he wants. Unfortunately, this interferes with personal evolution because while he facilitates that hooking up, he also sacrifices the opportunity to confront his fears, to feel his grief and his loss over aging, to become more vulnerable to the truth and to other people, and to open the door, not only to self-awareness but also to someone who might not mind dating a man in his sixties.

Now, this is a relatively unserious example of very serious business, actually one of the primary sicknesses of our time. Having fewer common grounds of fact and truth to stand on, we're left to wander in a fun-house mirror of shifting impressions and distortions and fakery. That allows us to devolve into a culture of voyeurs and exhibitionists, image consumers, and image-makers.

In one article about the imposter syndrome, psychologists compare it to Trompe l'oeil. Trompe l'oeil is that style of painting that's so realistic that it appears to be three dimensional when it's actually one dimensional. It's how theater and movie set designers create realistic sets and backdrops. In French, Trompe l'oeil means, "fools the eye." The psychiatrist was making the point that this painterly skill of Trompe l'oeil is comparable to the one that we have as individuals for creating false impressions in order to mislead others by way of the fraudulent self, belief that the self we construct with words and stories and images and feelings is what or who we actually are.

Now, the self-image that accumulates from childhood, comes to represent the person that we call ourselves, but is it? This is the question, are we actually nothing more than the body, mind, collections of thoughts and stories and circumstances and memories and feelings? Can we really be defined only by our biography, all objectivity and no subjectivity, just the facts now? Well, the answer is no, of course not, because in spite of what scientific materialists tell us, we are mysterious beings with many dimensions, and we can't be reduced to the sum of our parts. There's always something ineffable, uncontainable, and metaphysical in us. It's an irreducible spirit without a name or form or a single lifespan. This being is unnameable and it doesn't require an image to resist. Let me repeat that.

This being that we are is unnameable and it doesn't require an ego or an image to exist. It can't be transacted, manipulated, or falsified. The being, this being, is the source of our originality, all originality. It's the divine force that transcends language, and it's endlessly procreative, it's endlessly producing forms and pouring them into the world. That's where our originality comes from, not from the mind-made self. When we tune into this source, that's when creativity surges for us. That thing that is latent in you, the spiritual being in you that's covered up by your image can finally shine forth.

That brings a profound sense of authenticity, self-belief, self-reliance, self-confidence. It's the confidence that says, "This is who I am. I don't need to please you, I honor your originality as well as my own, but I'm not afraid of the truth. I'm not afraid of the truth." That's where that confidence comes from.

I saw a beautiful example of this years ago on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, it was a woman who was semi-nude and she had had a double mastectomy, and she had this beautiful tattoo across her chest. I was just mesmerized by this photograph for the very reason that in showing her wounds without any shame and turning them into something beautiful, she was saying, "I am not afraid of the truth."

That is a central spiritual point that we're making today. That deceived by our own Trompe l'oeil, that fooling of the eye, we mistake artifice for reality, and we overlook the existence of our own true nature. We stop at the surface and the manipulation of the surface. The virtual age magnifies the ego strategies for survival, as well as our predacious capacities for self-deception, because long before we start attempting to fool other people, we're already fooling ourselves without being aware of it, we're fooling ourselves into believing a simulacrum of the truth, a story about who we are, a self that we construct with words and stories and images and feelings, and imagine that that is who we are. That's the self-image that accumulates from the time that we are small.

Now, when we step outside our choreographed self-image and into the power and creativity of the true self, it has a magnetic and liberating effect on other people as well, which is why we love true originals so much. They have this magnetic quality, people who dare to be themselves. So ask yourself, "How much do you tailor your own image? How real and unguarded do you allow yourself to be? Are you transactional in how you create your self-image and what is it you're trying to manipulate others into giving you? It's a great question, do you ever feel like an imposter or a fraud and why is that? Is it at work, is it with your family, is it in your spiritual practice, is it in love relationships? Finally, what do you lie about regularly or misrepresent to keep a certain image in place? What's the value of doing that for you, what are the payoffs for doing that, and what do you give up in so doing as well? These are really great questions to ponder.

So now let's move into our writing exercise, I'd like you to please now take fifteen minutes to write about whether you feel like an imposter in your own life. Do you ever feel like an imposter in your own life, and if so, what feels fraudulent? Be as specific as you can be, we'll take 15 minutes to do that, please, and then we'll come back together as a group.

**[pause]**

[silence]

**Mark:** Let's start to finish up.

[silence]

**Mark:** Let's come back together as a group, welcome back, put your writing aside for the moment. So how was this for you, investigating where you feel like an imposter in your own life, where do you feel false? What are you afraid of others finding out about you? What do you misrepresent habitually in order to feel okay enough to be in the world? These are universal questions, we all do this.

As we've been discussing today, we now have the opportunity to in-authenticate ourselves even further, to fake so much of what we put out into the world. As seekers, it's particularly important, as people who are interested in uncovering the truth, for us to be aware of what we're projecting, why we're projecting it, and how we're projecting it, and the discrepancy that there may be between that composed self, that public self, that Bill Maher is talking about. That avatar that does everything right and has such a fantastic life, and the human being, the raw vulnerable human being underneath, who is actually the source of our power.

Jay, why don't we see if we have some questions and would be great to have some conversation.