

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Your Healing Story: An Interview with Lewis Mehl-Madrona

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Mark Matousek: Well, welcome Lewis Mehl-Medrona. It's really good to finally meet you.

I wanted to begin by asking you about the healing power of story. How is it that you first became interested in how narrative can change a person's life?

Lewis Mehl-Medrona: When I got to medical school, we had an experience where we could be an outpatient doctor for a year, half-day a week. I chose to do that. They gave us an hour with each patient. Sometimes, I would run out of things to do. I thought, "Well, what would my grandmother do if she had extra time on her hands?" [chuckles] I started telling people stories. If we had extra time, I would just say, "Oh, you know that reminds me of a story." I would tell a story.

I grew up in a culture where people told stories to inspire you, to instruct you, to help you to understand that you could be different, do different, feel different, transcend, feel, all of those things. Honestly, it wasn't until I got to medical school that I came to realize that the dominant culture didn't do that. I was oblivious of the dominant culture until I got to Stanford where it rules.

I went to undergraduate at Indiana University. I spent most of my time running all-night Carbon-13 NMRs, which is the precursor of MRIs. We were developing that technology. I was like a lab rat. I had no idea what human beings did in the big world. [laughs] Though I minored in creative writing, so I wasn't a total lab rat. My major was biophysics, but my minor was creative writing.

I just kept telling people stories. One day someone asked me where I learned hypnosis. I looked at them and I said, "What's that?" [laughs] They said, "That thing that you're doing." [laughs] I said, "Oh, so that's called hypnosis. All right." Then I started studying hypnosis to see what I was doing. I began to realize that they were a dominant culture-derived to people, though I wouldn't say they're completely in the mainstream, who were telling stories also for healing purposes. I think Milton Erickson, of course, is the most famous.

Also, many other people, even psychoanalysts were telling patient stories to help inspire them to change. Then I discovered that there was a whole narrative movement with Jerome Bruner and Theodore Sarbin. There was a European version of all this with Vygotsky and Bakhtin, and Voloshinov and other people like that. Then I actually got a master's degree in narrative studies. You have to just be more intellectual about the whole thing.

Mark: What goes into making a healing story? What are the components of a healing story?

Lewis: The person has to connect to the story. The characters have to be similar to them or from their culture. They have to feel that the characters are like them. They have to identify with the characters. A good story leads people to believe that they can do what the characters did. That they can transcend, practice resilience, overcome obstacles, make a difference in the world just like the characters did.

A lot of what we're doing in storytelling is building agency. Many people have no agency. They don't feel like they can do anything to make any difference in their world or for themselves. A heroic story, for example, teaches them that taking action in the world produces results. That if you do something it will matter. You will feel better, get better. Something positive will happen.

There's a marvelous study of Southern Black people with really high blood pressure listening to stories while watching videos of people who look like them and sound like them, getting their blood pressure under control. Just listening to the stories caused them to get their blood pressure under control. The guy who did this study repeated it in Vietnam, which I thought was really cool in tiny villages in Northern Vietnam, or in the north of Vietnam, as we should say since there's not a North Vietnam.

He found the same thing. Again, what he did was to record people. He called them cultivating good storytellers. He recorded people who looked correct and sounded right and told a compelling story. Compelling meaning you've got my full attention. I really connect with you. To be honest, the literature is much better for novel writing about how to tell a good story and using psychology or even narrative studies.

People who write novels have been struggling with this for a long time, longer than psychologists and narrativists, or narratologists. In fact, that's where I've turned nowadays to get my inspiration is to people who write novels and write about writing novels. There's a book that I'm reading right now, I thought I had it out but I don't. It's called *The Art of Time in Fiction*.

Mark: Oh, it's so wonderful.

Lewis: Oh, you know that book?

Mark: By Sven Birkerts.

Lewis: Silber. S-I-L-B-E-R.

Mark: Oh, there's another one by Sven Birkerts. It's with a very similar title about *The Art of Time in Memoir*. I think it is.

Lewis: Okay, I'll have to look for that. There's another great book that I read was called *Save the Cat*. It's a great book about creating compelling stories. It turns out that the most important thing according to these people is a good character. I believe that because I'm slightly addicted to *NCIS: New Orleans*.

Mark: [chuckles]

Lewis: It's not because they have good plots. The plots are crappy. It's because of the characters.

Mark: Interesting.

Lewis: They're rich. They're complex. Creating a good therapeutic story is inspiring people to be more than they thought they could be. To be more than they thought they could be. It doesn't really matter what the domain is, I think it's relevant. coming from Indian country; we don't have that split between mind and body, so the same things that would help depression would theoretically help arthritis. They're not different, which is not like mainstream medicine.

The goal is to inspire and uplift and to transform. The interesting thing is that sometimes I'll tell someone a story and they won't have a clue why I picked it, or I don't know what to do, but I just pick the last story that I listened to. They come back the next week and they tell me,

“Oh, that story. It was so powerful,” and they tell me what they got out of it. Sometimes people just need to see the plan who becomes their own tree. The storyteller gives them that.

Mark: What about the stories that we tell ourselves? Is it possible to change our personal narrative to help us heal, and wake up and become more whole?

Lewis: Oh, absolutely, but I think the difficulty of mainstream culture is that we all want to do it alone in isolation. Within the indigenous world, we recognize that healing takes place in the community. I need to tell my stories to others and I need to hear their stories in order to change. The substitute for that is to write down my story, so I can read it back to myself, which is almost having another person but not quite as good.

One of the things that I love to do with people is have them write about something in their lives in the third person, with all the characters as animals. It takes them away from their stuckness in their situation by turning everything into a metaphor. I love that six-part story exercise by Yehudi, where you try and produce a story as far away in time and space as you possibly can, so as to move it away from where you’re stuck into a metaphor that will show you how to get unstuck. Which reminds me, have you ever been to the Athens airport?

Mark: The Athens airport?

Lewis: Yes.

Mark: Many years ago.

Lewis: Do you remember what the luggage carts are called?

Mark: I don’t. [chuckles]

Lewis: They’re called metaphor.

Mark: Is that true? [laughs]

Lewis: Yes. In Greek, a metaphor is something that makes it easier to move things from one place to another.

Mark: That’s so interesting.

Lewis: That’s what we’re trying to do. We’re trying to move things from one place to another. There’s a book, a novel that I just love called *Wild Dogs*.

Mark: Oh, *Wild Dogs*?

Lewis: Yes. It’s by Helen Humphreys. She talks about this pack of wild dogs. Her ex-partner let her dog runoff. He got caught up in this pack of wild dogs who live at the edge of the city. She can’t figure out how to get him back. She goes to the edge of the city every evening and twilight to try and get his attention and get him out of the pack but nothing works. Then she says, “Love is like those wild dogs, it hunts you down, and when it catches you, you never know if it will let you go or not, and so on and so forth.” It’s just beautiful.

Mark: Yes. It’s a beautiful image. Is it true to say that every life is a work of fiction?

Lewis: Oh, absolutely. Roland Barthes said that. I believe it to be true. There's another quote and it might be from him as well that fiction is truer than a life.

Mark: Or fiction is the lie that tells the truth. That's another way of doing it.

Lewis: That's another way of saying it because we're always co-producing narratives with everyone we know. I like to tell people that we're all characters in each other's plays. We're always being recruited for another play. We have to be careful to determine whether or not we want to play that role in this other person's play. It might be really good in act one and two, but it might turn really bad in act three, often happens for Shakespearian characters. Become aware of the role that you're being asked to play in someone else's drama.

Mark: And your own.

Lewis: And your own. What is my drama? Dan McAdams invented this *Life Story Interview* at Northwestern University. I love using that interview with everyone. It sets the stage for memoir writing. I think we all need to write our autobiographies in order to understand what it is that we're up to. In writing your autobiography, you become aware of what is the project of my life? What am I trying to do here? Am I succeeding at it? Am I failing? Am I on the mark? Am I off the mark? What am I up to?

Mark: Right. The situation though, the biography isn't really the story, is it?

Lewis: No.

Mark: The story is what the facts have to us and what we've done with them.

Lewis: Yes. It's what exists between the facts.

Mark: Yes. What changes in a person in your experience as a psychiatrist, when they realize that they are telling the story? They are the narrator, not the narrative. They're the storyteller, not the story. What changes in terms of personal agency?

Lewis: Well, they get some. It's the main thing.

[chuckling]

They start to think, "Well, if I'm the narrator, what do I really want to happen next? Where do I want to be?" I love writing the story of, "You, five years in the future." I often have people write the most positive version, the most negative version, and the average ho-hum version. They can see the range of possibilities, where you might be in five years. When we do that, we have more capacity to get there, to get to where we want to go. We become more mindful of where we want to go. It's easy to get somewhere if you know where you're going, like having a map, so to speak.

Mark: I'm interested and this may get too wonky or may not be interesting, but I'm interested in how the brain actually uses narrative to affect behavior or to manifest reality.

Lewis: Okay. This is something I'm totally into.

Mark: Oh, good.

Lewis: Yes. There's this part of the brain or this circuit in the brain that's then called default mode network, which is a really dumb name for it. It was called that because back in the '70s when people started doing fMRIs of everything because you could get tenure really quickly that way. They would have people do addition. They would have people do subtraction, multiplication. You name it. The control group was always, "Well, don't do anything."

There was a fellow from the Netherlands who looked at the control group and he said, "When people are not doing anything, they're doing something very similar to each other." It wasn't until 2001 that Marcus Raichle at Washington University in St. Louis figured out that what they were doing was making up stories. He said, "You know what guys? Default mode network is really story brain. It's the network, it's the brain circuit that we use to produce and understand stories."

Then some other guys at university college, London, Turner was one of them, figured out that the main reason we make up stories is to manage our social relationships. They started calling it, social brain, the circuit. It's either default mode network, which sounds really dumb, or story brain, which I like, or social brains. We spend a lot of time in this circuit, running this circuit.

It's what we do when we're not doing anything. We're making up stories about the important people in our lives. Often we're solving relationship problems. We're running scenarios, running different stories about what would happen if I do X or Y or Z. My favorite example is you have a fight with your loved one in the morning. You have to get to work so you have to leave home unresolved. On the way home, what are you doing?

You're making up stories about what you're going to say when you get home. How you're going to resolve this. You're considering various strategies that you might perform on the way home such as buying flowers, buying chocolates, going to the bar and getting drunk, bringing home Thai food. That's the way to my wife's heart. Sorry, but I will tell you that it's Thai food.

Mark: [chuckles] Right.

Lewis: Good Pad Thai and all conflict is forgotten.

Mark: [laughs] In addition to social brain, isn't the story brain also existential brain in the sense that it's making sense of who we are in the world? What does our existence mean? It's not just about other people, it's about how we navigate and negotiate being alive in a mysterious dimension.

Lewis: Exactly. What I would add to that is that we never do that outside of the context of our relationships with other people. Which is a difference between indigenous philosophy and European philosophy. Within indigenous philosophy, and I'm working on a PhD in that right now, for fun, just as an aside. [chuckles] Within indigenous philosophy, there is that human beings can't exist outside of relationships with other human beings. That the self is found between our bodies. The self is non-local. We're always making sense of existence, in relationship to those around us embedded in a physical context that's our world.

Our human world, which is embedded in our natural world, which is embedded in the spiritual world -- we can't escape this sort of series of Russian dolls, where one is in the next and the next in the next. We can't get out of the center and be outside of our context. It's just

not possible. We're always trying to understand our meaning in the world but it's always in relation to other people and to, what I would say, to the natural world and the spiritual world as well.

Mark: Is it possible to know ourselves without story?

Lewis: I don't think so. I believe it's possible to have pure awareness that exists without story.

Mark: Yes.

Lewis: That's what the Buddhists aspired to do. I think it's a laudable goal. I certainly attempt myself to meditate and to be thoughtless. I'm doing mindlessness meditation. However, the moment I come back to life, I need stories to just tell me what to do. How to orient myself like, "Okay, so it's 10:30 in the morning. What am I going to do when we stop talking?" I need a story about what the day is supposed to look like, in order to know what I'm going to do next.

Mark: I'm also interested in the idea of story as interpretation of our existence. We have this extraordinary ability to believe what we make up. That's what I don't understand from psychiatric, from a psychological point of view. How is it that we can talk ourselves into believing these stories?

Lewis: You know what I think it comes down to is comfort with uncertainty. Some of us can sit here and say, "I don't know what the fuck is going on?" That's okay. I'm having a good day.

[laughter]

The Buddhists call that radical acceptance. I think people like the QAnon crowd.

Mark: Yes, good example.

Lewis: Yes, it just drives them nuts. It feels psychotic for them to not know what's going on. It's better to have a crazy story in which they belong, in which they have a place and a role, in which they totally understand what's going on than to be in that situation where you say, "I don't know what's going on?" Some of us can tolerate more uncertainty than others. Maybe some of us are more comfortably embedded than others. I feel like I'm comfortably embedded in my community.

I have my friends. I have my children. I have my wife's family. I have some colleagues that I really admire and hang out with. I don't need QAnon to have belonging. I have belonging. I think it comes down to uncertainty, sense of belonging, and sense of meaning and purpose. If you have no sense of belonging, no meaning or purpose, and you're not embedded in the community, well, QAnon looks really good.

Mark: Yes.

Lewis: Or any other cult for that matter, looks really good.

Mark: What that says to me is that narrative can be used for both positive and negative purposes. That there's a real shadow side to this knee-jerk impetus to create story. That it can really blind us as well as opens us up to new possibilities.

Lewis: Absolutely. Story is story. There's an amazing book by Goebbels about the use of story in propaganda. The Nazis understood story incredibly well. Trump's people understand story incredibly well. They've got it down. It's really just about how the brain works. People can manipulate the brain for evil or for good or in between.

Mark: Right.

Lewis: That's the ethics of stories, really, what is our intention? What are we trying to do? Are we trying to sell insurance? People use stories. Watch the TV, There's the GEICO story of the lizard, the gecko selling insurance. That's a story. Liberty Mutual with the EMU. Stories are everywhere. Are we telling stories to get people to buy stuff? Are we telling stories to help people to live better lives, however, they define that? No, it's our intention to serve ourselves or our company, or is it to serve the person who we're sitting with or the group whom we're sitting with? That is the ethical dimension of all of us.

Mark: On a personal level, we can ask ourselves, am I telling this story in order to feel like the victim? Am I telling the story in order to feel like the success story? We frame ourselves in roles within our own narratives. It seems to me that once we understand how we're doing that, we can make more objective choices and bust ourselves the parts are not authentic.

Lewis: I think so. I think we're always trying to save face to someone or ourselves. We're telling ourselves stories that prevent us from feeling bad, from feeling shame especially, from feeling guilty, from feeling that we did something wrong. We're often telling ourself stories that justify our actions. I imagine the guy who killed George Floyd is telling himself his story that he was doing the right thing.

Mark: Undoubtedly.

Lewis: Yes. Among his social group, he probably was but not for the rest of us.

Mark: As a psychiatrist, if you were working with Chauvin, the guy who killed George Floyd, how would you work with him to question that narrative and come to a more sane and truthful position?

Lewis: Well, here's the problem. As a psychiatrist, I would have to understand first his goal. That might not be his goal. I might not be able to do that. His goal might not be to see the world like you and I see it. His goal might be to stay ensconced in the way he sees the world. I would have to respect that.

Mark: Can you give me an example? If you want to change identifying characteristics, can you give me an example of someone who you've worked with, who has been able to change their personal story to really reframe how they see themselves in their lives in a way that surprised you?

Lewis: Yes. One of my favorite stories that I like to tell is about a woman who came to me when I was practicing in Tucson. She was hideously depressed. She was just so depressed that I felt depressed sitting with her. When that happens, I usually result in one of my time-honored questions which is, "Seen any good movies lately?"

[laughter]

I asked her. Suddenly she brightened like it was a transformation. She said, “*Whale Rider*.” I don’t know if you’ve seen that?

Mark: Yes, of course.

Lewis: It’s a lovely movie. I’m like, “Really?” She’s like, “Yes.” I’m like, “So, tell me with whom you identify?” She said, “Well, obviously, the main character.” I’m like, “Well, what is that all about?” She told me her story. She was a nice Jewish girl in Brooklyn. She fell in love with a cowboy from Tucson. Well, that’s a mistake right there. If you listen to country music you know that can only go badly.

[laughter]

She didn’t listen to enough country music. She moved to Tucson to his ranch not knowing even how to drive. Well, that’s crazy in Tucson because public transportation sucks. There she was stuck on his ranch with nothing to do and he’s decided that he doesn’t love her anymore. Now, that is sad. I’m like, “Oh, my God. What am I going to do with this one?” [laughs] I said, “All right, well, you like that character and,” I forget, blocking on her name right now.

I said, “What could we do now, right now in this moment or series of moments for you to feel more like her and less like how you feel right now?” She said, “Stick-fighting. I could learn stick-fighting.” You remember that scene where the character bribes her brother with beer to teach her stick-fighting. Then she defeats the people of her grandfather, which really annoys him. I’m like, “Okay, stick-fighting.” We look for a stick-fighting teacher in Tucson. We found one. He was a Filipino guy.

He wasn’t Maori but maybe one stick is as good as another stick. I called him up with her right there in the office. Amazingly, he answered the phone. I said, “Hey, I’ve got someone here who wants to learn stick-fighting. Will you teach her?” He said, “Her?” I said, “Yes, her.” He said, “I’ve never taught a girl.” I said, “Well, any problems with that?” He said, “I guess not.” He said, “Why not?” [laughs] I put her on the phone with him and they connected. Over the course of a few months, she totally transformed.

Mark: What changed in her? How did she change?

Lewis: She became confident. She became self-assured. She developed agency. She learned how to drive. She moved into town. I said, “You’re so different.” I said, “What happened?” She said, “Well, I’m not afraid anymore.” I said, “Why?” She said, “Well if anyone threatens me I can kill them.” [laughs] She said, “Besides, I have so many dates you can’t believe it.” I said, “Really?” She said, “Yes. There’s only men in my stick-fighting classes.”

Mark: [laughs]

Lewis: She said, “They’re all soldiers from the Air Force base or policemen.” She said, “Apparently, they like girls who can beat them up.”

[laughter]

Mark: That's great. Oh, by identifying with a character, she was able to transcend her victim story and step into some power.

Lewis: Yes. Exactly.

Mark: Wow. Just one last question. I want to ask you about the spiritual uses of story. Of course, from the native tradition they're inseparable, I think with the narratives you tell around day-to-day life. What distinguishes a spiritual story that heals and can unify?

Lewis: Well, I think it's just a story that includes sacred beings as opposed to ordinary beings. I think any story has the potential to heal and unify. Really, the spiritual stories I think are about orienting us to our place in the universe. Most of the Native American stories teach us to be humble, to realize that we're a pretty insignificant part of the universe, that we're interdependent and interconnected with all beings.

There's a guy in Nova Scotia who created this concept of two-eyed seeing which is to see the world with both indigenous perspective and conventional scientific perspective. Within that, there's a word in Mi'kmaq, or something. I'm probably butchering the pronunciation. It means that we're all interconnected, interdependent, and interrelated. To me, that's a spiritual story.

It's a story that teaches that. It's the meaning in the Lakota, which is my father's tribe. We say Mitákuye Oyás'īŋ, which means that we're all related. We're all relatives. Not just humans but everything, everything is a relative. To me, that's a spiritual story, which is really system science if you think of it or ecology as well. It's the story that we're all interdependent, interconnected, and interrelated. To me, those are the most powerful, profound spiritual stories because they guide our behavior.

Whatever I do, I have to think about its effect on everything and on all beings, not just human beings but water beings and raccoons and everything. It's unethical to be selfish and to think that it's all about me.

Mark: That seems to me medicine for what ails us in an alienated, fragmented, secular culture where we don't feel a lot of connection with others often or to the environment. That seems to me that's the perfect antidote to the disease that we have.

Lewis: Absolutely. That's what Albert Marshall who reinvented this idea of two-eyed seeing says. He says, "We need these ideas to survive as humans. Otherwise, we'll disappear and some other matter will take over."

[laughter]

Mark: Right. Well, thank you very much. It's so good to meet you. I appreciate you taking the time to be with us today.

Lewis: Well, thank you. It was fun.

Mark: It was fun. Thank you, Lewis.