

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Find Your Questions: An Interview with Joan Borysenko

May 2021



Mark Matousek: Hi, Joan. It's so good to see you. Welcome to The Seekers Forum.

Joan Borysenko: Thanks so much for having me, Mark. You do such a wonderful job. I am your student and so happy to be here with you.

Mark: Thank you very much. I wanted to start by asking you, I'm interested in the moment when you as a scientist, as a young woman, realized that you were also a mystic. What was that moment like? Can you remember?

Joan: Oh, listen, I remember that moment well, because actually, it was mysticism brought me to science and not vice versa. Briefly, when I was ten, I developed a serious mental illness. It started as obsessive compulsive disorder and it really had a psychotic edge to it shall we say.

I was imagining that once I did a whole variety of rituals from hand washing to all my reading being upside down and backwards, that headhunters were going to break into the house and kill my parents, and I could literally hallucinate them starting to manifest on the unmanifest world. If you interrupted me during a ritual, I mean the panic was overwhelming because, I thought I failed, everyone will die now.

Without question, I have to be careful when I tell this story, not to get too far into it or I'll go there. It was a hell state and trying to get out of it, I was ten-years-old. I'm now seventy-five. Sixty-five years ago, there was no Klonopin, there was no Prozac, there was no cognitive behavior therapy. There was nothing. [laughs] I went to a couple of psychiatrists and basically, they said to my parents, "So sorry, hope she grows out of it, or you know, she might get institutionalized."

My favorite thing back then as a ten-year-old was actually going to a Jewish summer camp. I loved it there. I love the old music. I love the dances. I love sitting in the pine grove as the light changed at night and we welcomed in the Sabbath, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to go.

One day, I was sitting in a chair and I was thinking about that camp and I was thinking about the feeling of the pine grove, and thinking about the little girl voices, that we would welcome the Sabbath queen with, it was something like, [sings] "Come, O Sabbath day, and bring peace and healing on thy wing, and to every troubled breast, speak of the divine behest. Thou shalt rest, thou shalt rest."

Imagine that, a chorus of sweet little girl voices and that's what I needed most, for my mind to come to rest and something about that pulled me into a mystical state of union, and I had a deep knowing. I had that sense of deep rest. It was like biblical, Mark, the feeling like I'm held in the palm of the divine one. I knew I wasn't alone and I completely knew that I could recover from this mental illness, but I also knew how. [laughs] I'm not saying that this would work for any other person.

This was my spiritual awakening. What happened was that I realized, if I continue to do the rituals, I'm going to stay stuck, and so, I have to unstick myself somehow and then I'm thinking, "How am I going to do that?" Because I'm so panicked when the headhunters start to manifest. Suddenly, a poem came through me and I'll tell you the poem, but this was my first creative writing exercise.

[laughter]

I grabbed my pencil and this was the poem. “Somewhere in the darkest night, there always shines a little light. This light, up in the heavens shines, to help our God watch over us. When a small child is born, the light, her soul does adorn. So when our only human eyes look up in the lightless skies, we must know, we must know even though we cannot see, that this light burns far into the night to help our God to watch over us.” That still-- [crosstalk]

Mark: How beautiful is that. [laughs] Ten-years-old?

Joan: That’s what came through at ten, and my knowing was, when the headhunters start to manifest and I need to do a ritual, I could say the poem instead. You could say it became a super ordinate ritual. I did that, and what it did was it hooked me back to that state of divine union and peace, it still can do that.

For three or four days the headhunters would come a few times less every day and finally they were gone. That was my first mystical experience and I continued to have experiences of light. By the time I was a scientist, [laughs] I’m thinking, “How could I study this?” That’s always the science and spirituality question. How can you study something that’s not measurable?

It is ineffable, that you can’t even find words to possibly describe the experience, but that’s how essentially, I ended up working with Herb Benson and studying meditation. This was now back in the late sixties and early seventies. At the same time, I became a scientist, my training as a doctor from Harvard Medical School. I’m a cell biologist with a postdoc in cancer cell biology; that was my first career.

At night, in the laboratory, when all the regular work was done we were doing experiments with Kirlian photography. [laughs] That was being back then. There was a wonderful man, the late Itzhak Bentov, who wrote a book called *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*. He had a Faraday cage in his basement and he was looking at, for example, healing at a distance –what kind of energy could be involved?

We did some experiments together, and my life had two tracks in a way. Sort of grant funded scientist and teacher of medical students by day and researcher of the ineffable, by night. [crosstalk]

Mark: You’re lucky you came of age in the sixties that you didn’t have to put this wall between the two sides of you.

Joan: Exactly. Because, at the same time, I remember I was very affected by the work of Ram Dass, aka Richard Alpert. In high school, my favorite book, in high school was Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*. I used to take my guitar and imagine what a masculine trip would look like. I tried to get access [laughs] to the experiments at Harvard, and of course, they weren’t taking any high school kids.

[laughter]

All that was happening and I knew enough to know before I discovered the work of actual mystics. Although, Aldous Huxley was a mystic I began to realize that there were plans in the natural world that could create perhaps the kind of experience that I had for which I had zero

context. It's like your grammar school library is totally lacking in books that you could [laughs] look into. That's how it all started.

Mark: Wow and so when— [crosstalk]

Joan: With writing, that's how my writing started. [laughs]

Mark: I was going to ask you, so you've always been somebody who has been engaged in self inquiry, you've always been a questioning person?

Joan: Oh, yes, absolutely. That's why eventually, I retrained as a psychologist, because the first reason I wanted to be a psychologist was out of compassion. I think a lot of kids who are sick physically or have a mental illness from which they recover, dream of growing up to help other people who have the same problem. For me, with the mystical experience, that led right into questions, what is reality? What is consciousness? What's the conscious mind to the unconscious mind? What is transpersonal? What are Jungian archetypes?

I became fascinated with that but my original field was health psychology because I was trained as a medical researcher, and then worked with Herb Benson and we ended up creating a clinic right at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. Believe me, Mark, I sat at a lot of death beds, you know that time very, very well. People often inquire very, very deeply as to what is the meaning of life when they know that life is limited. I sat with a lot of people in that kind of very deep inquiry and I grew greatly because of that.

Also, at about that time in my life, I became an inadvertent student of Tibetan dream yoga and that's pretty fascinating, lucid dreaming. I got to the point where I'd wake up in my dreams at least two or three times a month, and I had some extraordinary experiences, because in that state of consciousness, you can be awakened several levels of reality at once.

You could see yourself in the bed below your normal waking consciousness, but you're in a dream scape. In the dream scape it's like, "Jesus, my father's house has many mansions." [laughs] You go to a lot of different places and inquiring about "What is this? Who are the helpful beings that come and help you learn in that state or overcomes fears in that state?"

I've been fascinated by self-inquiry and fascinated by what's the endless subjectivity of our own mind and how we get caught in it. Can we actually reach a higher state, where we're in a larger perspective? It's mostly fascinating to me.

Mark: Endless, and not only they helpers, but also the saboteurs, the nemeses, your bogeyman.

Joan: Oh, I love the nemeses. [laughs]

Mark: Oh, yes? What are they? What is the function of the nemesis in our psyche?

Joan: Oh, yes, exactly. I call these, including our own critical self, sacred enemies. Because when you go into the rabbit hole of rumination, now putting on the kind of psychologist hat in the little neuroscience, that's the default mode network where the ego takes over with its endless chatter and it tells you, "What a worthless worm you are." Or "What you've done is wrong." Or it ruminates on who you may have offended, who now will know you're a nogoodnik [laughs] and then you will be abandoned or whatever your fantasies in this sort are, that inner critic.

It's very interesting to recognize that it's possible to actually turn off the default mode network when you come into the present and that it's possible to train yourself to be more in the present. One of my very, very dear friends, who's such a great psychologist, is Rick Hanson, and Rick is always talking about installing the good and I try not to waste a moment of good.

This morning a bud on a cactus opened here and it's just the visual fascination. Then like, does it smell? What is the tactile sense? Just letting yourself be curious and open up all your senses to something beautiful like that for ten or twenty seconds, calms down the default mode network and the negativity bias of the mind, and then more and more, you find yourself dwelling in the present moment, and of course, meditation.

It's what the meditation researchers have been trying to figure out like, "You can trip into an illuminated state from time to time, but how do you make it a trait? Is it possible to hardwire it into your nervous system?" Yes, little by little. Little by little, you find yourself more present, more joyful. When you talk about spirituality, the descriptions of it, the more recent psychological circles or medical neuroscience circles, would be a state of deep connection and a state of deep connection where the chatter of the mind shuts up. [laughs]

If you read Michael Pollan's book, his most recent book really on that history and use of psychedelics, what's interesting about them is this is what they do. They kind of shut down the default mode network, and then [laughs] what's in you all along, whatever you want to call it, your own true nature has a chance to finally shine out because it's not occluded by the constant self-referencing of I, me, and mine.

We're living in a great time when neuroscience is coming together with psychology, with ancient wisdom, with mysticism. Now, some of the newest treatments in psychiatry for anxiety and depression things that we really didn't necessarily have good pharmaceuticals to deal with, they're finding, "A ha." Maybe, in the right hands, in a in a very safe setting, so are the psychedelics whether its MDMA or Ketamine or Psilocybin can actually create a trait, not only is state change, but a trait change.

For me, the experiments that just made my hair stand on end, where the experiments done a couple of years back that are still on going, both at NYU and Johns Hopkins, looking at people who were facing death, had a couple of sessions of Psilocybin and lost their fear of death; about 75% or 80% of them had lasting effects of decreases in anxiety and depression. That's a biggie when you're facing death. It's such, this a convergence happening. [laughs]

Mark: Now, we're finally having the harmonic convergence they've been talking about for twenty years. [crosstalk]

Joan: Yes.

Mark: It's hard to imagine today that there was actually ever a mind-body split. That there are people-- [crosstalk]

Joan: I know.

[laughter]

Mark: It's hard to really go back to that time, but can you give us, it's a huge question, what does that change when we realize that these are one and the same and there is no difference? What are the fundamental differences in how we see ourselves?

Joan: Oh, that's such a great question, because if you look at your body as something independent versus inquiring, like, "Oh, what's going on in my body?" It's not just my body, it must be starting in my thoughts, and my psyches, in my behaviors, in my environment; you lose some of that sense of being like a separate piece of meat walking around and you realize, "Why am I part of the web of life?" I have to inquire as to, "Oh, this is interesting, I have a symptom of some kind. What am I thinking? Is there something that's stressing me or bothering me?"

Literally, depending on whose research you look at, some are between 70% to 90% of the reasons why people visit the doctor for stress-related conditions, and so you got to say, "What's stressing me? What are my habits of mind? What's unresolved? What do I regret? What do I resent? What's driving my body to be afraid?" On the other hand, "What allows my body to be peaceful? What allows me to be present? What allows me to reduce inflammation and my systems to become quiescent? What am I eating? Who are my friends?" [laughs] It is such a big inquiry.

Little by little, coming back to the definition of spirituality is deep connection. By that kind of inquiry, you begin to put out strands of connection everywhere to everything, to the seasons, to what grows, to anything you can think of, you're part of the awe.

Mark: Now, nature and bringing people into nature is so much a part inseparable from the work that you do.

Joan: Oh, it is. Yes, you caught me though. [crosstalk] Go ahead.

Mark: Oh, excuse me Joan. How does our sense of self change, and enlarge, in connection to nature?

Joan: It's such a great question, because first of all, I think we've all read about nature deficit disorder. What happens, you're just sitting inside all day or thinking that your food comes in plastic packs from the supermarket and forgetting that it grew somewhere, or that it was a living being or whatever it was. Just simply, at a very basic level, the way that you nourish your body changes when you realize, "Oh, I'm part of nature."

Taking a vitamin is not the same as eating a carrot, that nature has within it, particularly what's growing locally, what your body needs. It's like the difference between – now I am reading a book called the *Baby Diaries*, it's about being a grandmother, what's her name? I forget, but people could look it up. She writes for *New York Times*.

She was talking about the difference, like how we used to disinfect anything our baby came in contact with, boil bottles and nipples, and all of this. Now, it's like, "Hey kid, eat off the floor. It's good for your microbes. [laughs] You're a part of nature. You'll have fewer allergies if you go out and play in the dirt, go get dirty." You're part of life, you can't be healthy when you're separated.

Then, of course, think of the ancient systems like Ayurveda that look at certain seasonal energy. Now we're changing now like early spring, cool and damp. You need certain

warming foods, lots of greens because you live in harmony with energetics and our science. Again, we don't have good words for energetics, but the vibes, we all know the vibes. [laughs] They're different seasonally. They're different where you live and you begin to really tune into these things.

This is a place in terms of nature and your body and your psyche, where metaphor is really important. Spring is a time for renewal. Spring is a time for increasing the life force energy, nature blossoms, we blossom. I have a program called GraceFull360, 360 degrees of the year around the sun and it's been fantastic for me in a couple of years of developing and offering that program. I see monthly, the seasonal energies, the different foods, even different meditations, for these different times to put you back in harmony with what's going on.

We are part of nature and it's so different. It's so uplifting to have that sense of unity. Just another way of knitting yourself back into the web of life, Mark.

Mark: That brings us back to what you were saying about mysticism. Because this mysticism is all about presence and the mind stopping and feeling a part of the whole, and when we don't have that, and when we're deprived of all, when we're deprived of wonder, we suffer, we're diminished by that. [crosstalk] As a psychologist, do you come across that a lot, a feeling of diminishment of awe?

Joan: Oh, the diminishment of awe. Awe, it's a hot research field right now. Very hot, awe and wonder. I live in Santa Fe, it's called here the Land of Enchantment, and one of the reasons I live here is because it puts me in a state of wonder and awe. At the magic hours in the night, and the morning, as the light changes, the earth is red; I'm looking out at a red mountain outside my window. It looks like it glows for more, then those states of mind, awe grabs you.

It just grabs you and it stops your mind and people who have more experiences of awe are happier. I remember working at a treatment center once, I was helping develop a mindfulness-based recovery program.

Most of the people who were in that treatment center knows of a wake-up call for me, it was really hard. They were young 17, 18, 20, 25, almost all of them, opiate addicts, and they'd come to group and they were in various levels of withdrawal. They were like everywhere, here or there, but not here, here. [laughs] They'd run out of class to go smoke cigarettes and I'm thinking, "What am I going to do with these people? This is crazy. What can I do?"

I said, "Hey, you use drugs to get into a state that feels good to you, right?" They said, "Yes." I said, "How about the state of awe?" Let's all remember a state of awe and it was like a light bulb went off and you could see people come to life, and they would talk about their states of awe, and so I said, "This is what recovery is. It's not giving up that state that you're trying so hard to get. It's a way of getting there volitionally without all the horrible side effects of ruining your life, so it's transformative.

Mark: It's a paradox, because we ought to be more awed than ever before with being able, Zooming thousands of miles in real-time, with extraordinary technological advances, but I don't think technology really brings us into awe in the way that nature does. Do you?

Joan: I can't speak for all technology. I know there's a lot of cool stuff going on with virtual reality. I met a guy, I said, "What's a virtual reality program you're working on?" He said, "The experience of being a tree." I thought, "I take off from that."

[laughter]

Mark: Let me ask you Joan. At this time of so much change and tumult in people's lives, could you just talk about why self-inquiry is particularly important and what kinds of practices you would recommend?

Joan: Yes. I think it's very important, because what people will often do in times of confusion, and this a very confusing time. Everything is uncertain. We're just coming out of the pandemic. Maybe, will there be another wave? We don't know, it depends where we are and all of that. So many people that have lost jobs are now finding different kinds of work. Some people are more resilient, they mobilize in times like this, and some people just can't handle it and take comfort in drinking, drugs, eating, lots of TV, just checking out to find some comfort.

What we all know is, yes, that distracting yourself with comfort works for a little while, but it's the antithesis of self-inquiry; it's all about keeping yourself out of your mind. Because it feels like a bad neighborhood, was that anti – a writer? [crosstalk]

Mark: Anne Lamont.

Joan: Yes, Anne Lamont, who said that, your mind will stay out of it, it's a bad neighborhood. As long as you view your mind as a bad neighborhood and it feels bad to be there, of course, you're going to look for comfort, it's only human. What happens for a lot of people is they have to hit bottom before they say, "It really is a bad neighborhood, there must be a better way."

[laughter]

Then they start to look for, "How can I reduce my stress? How can I cut down on the feeling of anxiety? How can I connect a little more?" I think, the main thing that people need is the moment of realization where you say, "Okay, I've been down the rabbit hole, time to come out." The intention is 99% of change.

Then I always tell people, if you make such a huge goal, like, "I'm going lose thirty pounds. I'm going to change my diet entirely. I'm going to meditate twice a day, I'm signing up for Zoom Yoga, blah, blah, blah." Basically, you'll never do it. It's just too much of a bite to chew.

It's always good to say, "What is one small thing that I can actually do right now?" Let's say, you decide exercise. I know that exercise is in general a panacea for mind and body. You can't just say to yourself, "I'm going to exercise." You have to go to your calendar and say, "Okay, six days a week, I'll take Saturday off. At 4:00 in the afternoon, I will put onto my calendar one hour of exercise. I have a little exercise bike, I'll get on that and following forty minutes of that, I'll stretch for twenty minutes." There are lots of stretching classes. That is something doable.

What it does, I'd say exercise is number one because it calms down the mind. I'm not going to go through the eight million fabulous things it does for your body, but it opens things up,

and I do recommend it to people. You can also zone out on your bicycle. It can be fun listening to music, maybe we'll choose that or listening to a book, but it's also a great time to ask questions about "How am I doing really? What's my day like?" That's one thing to choose, one thing.

For everyone, here's my one basic recommendation, which I learned at least forty years ago from brother David Steindl-Rast, who is so cool. This dude was a Zen teacher as well as being a Benedictine monk and he's just cool and a really fabulous human. I read his book, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*. Then I heard him give a lecture and he said this one thing, he said, "Every night before you go to bed, review for about a minute one thing that really caught your attention, that delighted you, that surprised you, that uplifted you during the day."

For example, the cactus flower that I spent a minute with today, and then I photographed twice. Maybe tonight at bed, I will review the cactus flower; the actual somatic feelings in your body, there isn't a bot, there's a body mind, and so I take the shape of that cactus flower. I take the shape of delight and in rerunning it for a minute. I'm doing what Rick Hanson sites all the research for installing it in my neural networks.

Night is also a good general time to retrospect your day. Years ago, I learned this from a dear friend of mine, the late Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and he says, "At night you go back and review your day from the moment you got up to this moment." I start with the Steindl-Rast exercise, I pick on something wonderful.

I also look at what were the things in general that I liked during the day or that happened, that felt good and where were the places that I felt regretful? Where were the places that I worked out of tune? Is there somebody that I need to make an apology to? Things like that so that I can say, "Okay, now thinking about tomorrow I'm going to set this straight and I'm going to do more of what felt good today."

That kind of retrospection is an important kind of reflection, and you're in bed anyhow, it doesn't take any extra time really. [laughs] The worst that can happen is you'll fall asleep during your retrospection. I think that's wonderful, it's great.

Then, of course, there's reflection in writing. Like you, I'm a writer by trade seventeen books later, but writing a book is very different in some ways, than reflecting on your life. I love your writing prompts. I must say, Mark, you do an amazing job. Like you, I give different writing courses, but mine are all about spiritual memoir. They're looking at your life from a higher perspective.

There's a book called, *Wise Aging*, by Linda Thal, T-H-A-L and the late Rabbi Rachel Cowan. Rachel was a student of Rabbi Zalman. I think this exercise that I'm about to describe might've originated with Zalman, but they outlined it beautifully and it's called *The River of Your Life*.

We have people, someone made a whole scroll like a tourist scroll of a big piece of paper with the river her life, or you use a poster board. From before the time you were born, all the little streams of ancestors that come into your life, then reviewing it, in seven year sections as it flows to that sea of unity. Looking at everything from like, who were the angels who showed up to help you when you needed it? Who were your sacred enemies?

You had a bad encounter with the dirty S-O-B, [laughs] and it later turned out that you learned something that was incredibly important to learn. You begin to integrate. There's a whole field of narrative, narrative coherence, integration. You begin to integrate your life, which integrates your brain, and you become a happier person.

In the course, we always do a meditation and we look down on the river of our life and whatever the topic may be, there's time to reflect and know what story comes to mind. It's such a process of bringing your life into a higher perspective with the idea of, it's an adventure. It's a gift. You look at any river, it's got whirlpools that keep sucking you down and sucking you down until finally you get it and you pop back out. It's got rough patches and waterfalls and it's got places of flow where the river just sings over those rocks. [laughs]

I love that kind of work. It's been fabulous for me, because I always write when the class is writing. [laughs] It's a time that, oh my goodness, so many stories come. Then, of course, and the sharing of stories with each other. You get to reflect on the fact that we have common humanity.

I'm not the only person who ever did something that I regret. I'm not the only person who was ever ashamed. I'm not the only person who was ever betrayed. This is the human adventure. The question is, "What can I take from that, that can teach me a little bit more about kindness, compassion, joy, creativity, humanity?"

Mark: Beautiful. Joan, it's so wonderful, always, to speak with you. You give me so much inspiration.

Joan: Thank you, Mark. Same for you. I just admire you and respect you and love you so deeply.

Mark: Thank you, my love. I will see you again soon and it's wonderful to have you with us.

Joan: Very cool. Thanks so much for having me.

Mark: Thanks so much.