

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Treasures in the Dark: An Interview with Beverly Donofrio

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Mark Matousek: Hello, Beverly Donofrio. Welcome to *The Seekers Forum*. Thank you so much for joining us.

Beverly Donofrio: Hello, Mark. Thank you for inviting me.

Mark: It's lovely to see you.

Beverly: And to see you.

Mark: I'll start by asking you about the darkness and creativity. One of the things that I loved about your book *Looking for Mary* is that you started in the midst of a real crisis. You've just broken up with this man. You're doubting your ability to love. You're in quite a dark place. Why did you begin it there?

Beverly: Well, because it launched the whole journey. It was like you have to break down before you breakthrough. I hit rock bottom. It was a real low point in my life. It was the middle of my life.

I was 40 years old. It was not what I thought it would be. I thought that by then I'd written a book. It was being made into a movie. I was being paid to write another book. I had a beautiful house by the ocean.

It was everything I ever thought I wanted. I've just broken up with a man or maybe he broke up with me or it was mutual. It's more like it. My heart was broken. Not so much because of that but because of life, because I was all alone in a place, and I just moved to this town. I didn't know anybody. I just felt unloved and unlovable and all alone and had no idea how to change it.

Mark: That's where the journey for *Looking for Mary* had to start, right, in that place of decimation?

Beverly: Yes, and desperation. It was like I had to be desperate to go to God because I had a lot of pride and a lot of anger towards the Catholic Church. I just thought, "What would happen if I did believe in God?" Like, "Who would be my friend? Nice people?"

[laughter]

Beverly: Now I think, "Why would I want anybody but a nice person to be my friend?"

Mark: Exactly. How did it begin to change for you, when you felt that your heart was beginning to open, there were glimmers of God's love or a spiritual connection? Could you give us a moment when that really became real for you?

Beverly: There were lots of moments. Maybe the first one was when – I began collecting Virgin Marys as kitsch. I went to a therapist who said, "Maybe you should try believing in God." I said, "Aah, you're crazy." Meanwhile, I was collecting these Virgin Marys. They were all over my house. I started to feel lighter. I planted a garden. I made friends. My life turned around. It was in the Northeast, and it was freezing cold. I had an opportunity to move to Los Angeles, to Santa Monica. The movie of my book seemed like it was about to be made. I thought, "I'm going to do it."

I've never lived anywhere but the Northeast. I laid in bed that night. That was the night before I left. All my Marys were in my car. Everything else had been shipped. I was just scared. I thought, "Maybe I'll pray a Hail Mary. Do I even remember it?" I did. I prayed it all the way across the country. I can't say that I felt the presence of God. I certainly wouldn't have named it that then. I felt safer. I can't say I was in a womb, but I was not as scared as I had been.

That was definitely a turning point. Then I went off to an apparition site for this radio documentary. People said, "Pray the rosary. It will change your life. She's calling you. She'll use you." I thought, "Whoo, what if the Virgin Mary really exists and is calling me and paying attention to me?" That was just so cool to even imagine that. I thought, "Well, for the purpose of this documentary, I'm praying a rosary every day just to see what happens. I will act as though I had faith and maybe it would follow."

It was an experiment. It was also my pride. It was the only way I could be comfortable doing that. It was for the documentary, not for myself. It changed everything. It really did.

Mark: What is it about Mary? What is it about the divine feminine that was so healing for you?

Beverly: Well, I have friends who are very devoted to Mary and make an argument that she's fierce and she's the goddess in all her forms. I believed that, too. For me, what I loved about the Virgin Mary or Mother Mary really was her unconditional love, her softness, her kindness. I could feel loved by her. I don't need a fierce God. I'm fierce. I needed to soften. I needed to open my heart. I needed to be more like that version of the goddess that I wanted to imagine. I needed to feel loved.

Mark: What is like for you now? How have you integrated it? How does it sit with you now? Would you call yourself a person of faith?

Beverly: Absolutely. God is number one on my list. I don't know, I think Mary is just one manifestation. It's the creative power of the universe or the universe. I don't even know what to call it. I experienced it. It's work. I still pray rosary every day except when I don't walk my dog [laughs]. I confess I only pray the rosary when I'm walking my dog. I still walk her every day.

[laughter]

Beverly: I don't know, I need meaning in my life. I need to think that this life means something. That there is a purpose. That I was born for a purpose. That the more I can connect with, I don't know, the divine, the nature, it's what I live for, really. It's like my days are dictated by that. I meditate in the morning. I do my yoga to set myself up. I stand outside and I look at the trees and I breathe in the air. The first thing I do when I wake up is I make my dog twirl three times and sit. Then I throw my hands up to the sky and say, "Thank you for my dog, God, and for my –

Mark: [laughs]

Beverly: – for my friends, my family. Just like that, it's just like, "Oh. I have joy." A lot of joy.

Mark: That's how you start your day?

Beverly: That's how I start my day, yes.

Mark: It's amazing. How has this shift in faith changed your life as a writer, changed your relationship to your own, your muse?

Beverly: Well, it's what I want to write about is how it's changed my writing. I want to write about the experience of God in my life or how the spirit moves in my life. I don't have that answer. All of my books are a quest. The latest one is about – the one that I'm working on now, I'm 71 years old. This is the last act of, "Who am I? Have I done what I wanted to do? What did I want to do? How can I become kinder, softer?" I have used the truth as a sword.

I was just thinking of – I have a friend who just started this website blog thing. She's a writer. She wrote something and it was just bullshit to me. It was under the guise of, "I'm being really honest about what it feels like now to be like this age." Anyway, I thought I wanted to point out something that seemed just disingenuous to me. Then I thought, "She didn't ask me." It's not my job. If she doesn't want to know what I know, so what; it's like I could just be soft. I don't have to tell everybody everything I think and everything I see every minute of the day. My job for the rest of my life is to open my heart and be soft and kind. That's my trajectory because of where I've come from. The book started being called *The Inheritance of Rage*. Now it's writing cards with dogs.

[laughter]

Mark: Oh, I love it. That's like your whole arc in there.

Beverly: Exactly.

Mark: That's funny.

Beverly: Exactly. I often think of this line from Tim Seibles, a poet. He said, "I didn't know what I didn't know and then I knew," and that's what writing does. I don't even know what I'm going to know by the time I'm done.

Mark: That's exactly what I was just going to ask you about the necessity of going into the unknown and unknowing and into the shadow for those rich things, those surprises and stories and things that are there. Could you speak to that a little bit, the importance of going into the dark into the unknown in the creative process?

Beverly: No, it's almost like it's all unknown. I like to think that--

Mark: It's uncomfortable places.

Beverly: Oh, the uncomfortable places. Why write if you're not going to do that, it's like, my whole thing is to show my shame. That is my spiritual – that's why I'm here, I think. That's why I'm a writer. I share my shame. I share the darkness so that other people can say, "Me, too, I'm not that bad." "I never heard anybody say that before," is what I was thinking, that's my whole mission in writing, really.

Mark: It really is for you; it is a spiritual process for you. It's an emotional, spiritual feeling and evolution.

Beverly: Even intellectually, like with my first book; I wrote it, and I had a contract, I handed it in, I had worked on it for seven years, and then I got a contract, worked on it for two more years, handed it in. He said, “I don’t know what to tell you, Bev, but it’s not good enough. You have to go back.” I was like, ah. And only in that final draft, so many, many, many drafts did I realize what the whole book was about, which I was saying – it was the story of a bad girl who makes good. I get pregnant in high school. I end up going to college after falling down on my face. That was the superficial arc, but the real arc was getting pregnant. Having my son was a blessing or a curse. It’s my choice. Hamlet said it first: nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so, and that’s true of every single book I’ve written. It’s like, it’s all in the way you see things. I didn’t know that for nine years, that’s what that book was about. Then once I figured that out, I could go back and make it really directly more about that.

Mark: Well, so when you are working with writers, when you’re working with creators, talk about courage. What do you say to them about the necessity to go to their dark materials, to go to the places that scare them?

Beverly: I say [silence] your writing is probably going to stink the first time you approach it and don’t get discouraged because you have so many walls built up, you have to go back and re-feel, relive those moments. That’s where the healing happens for you as a writer, but you’re going to have all resistance to that, and it is going to show in the writing. It’s going to be flat, or even the grammar’s going to be – it’s so obvious to me as the teacher, having gone through this process with so many memoir writers and I just say, “You just keep at it.” The effort itself breaks down those walls. Then you get to relive it and refuel those things. Then you have to craft it for someone else to want to read. I think that’s where the real healing comes.

That’s like, it moves the experience from the emotional side of the brain to the logical side of the brain, which is what EMDR does, the rapid eye movement and tapping. I see so many people transform in the process of writing their books. They’re just different people by the end of the book, hands down, every single one of them. I used to have qualms. I teach at a graduate school and people come wanting to publish their books. They want to be professional writers. I used to think, “Not everybody’s going to be. Am I enabling people? Am I full of shit?” I realized after not too long that it doesn’t matter because writing is good for them. They are going to have a better life because they wrote the book.

Mark: One of the things I really admire about you, and I love so much about your work is that you’re able to hold the grace, hold the spiritual elevation, and also be funny, be irreverent, be ironic, be self-deprecating. You don’t lose the shadow, so to speak. You always feel grounded. I’m interested, what do you think about the new age movement and this idea that we can surpass, we can just leap over the darkness, and that it’s an illusion.

Beverly: Do people really say that?

Mark: Go into the light.

Beverly: Do people really say that and believe that?

Mark: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

Beverly: Oh my God. No, there's no way. It won't work. Forget it. No, it'll come up to bite you in another way. It's just, it's there. You don't have light without dark.

Mark: It seems so obvious.

Beverly: It's so simple.

Mark: Of course, but so many folks feel like the dark, it's an old idea. That you have to go into that and it is old paradigm thinking. What we really want to do is just move toward the light and move away from the illusion of all of this pain.

Beverly: Yes. All right, I don't want to get real dark here, but I was raped when I was 56 in my own bed in Mexico. Fine, it all turned out, nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. It was amazing. It was horrible and it was not horrible, but there were five victims. We all went to court to convict him, except for one, a Buddhist who said she wasn't going to the dark. It was like, I have such a chip on my shoulder towards Buddhists, because of that, like, "What? You're going to let the guy run free because you don't want to go to the dark?" No.

Mark: We have to be able to hold onto that and be able to be in touch with our pain and know that it coexists with freedom and joy.

Beverly: Absolutely and pain is how you grow. Pain brings you closer to God. The times that I've been really in, like when I was raped, it brought me closer – I entered a liminal space. It was like, I needed God. I needed God. Later, I ended up writing about it in the newspaper because no one had gotten the facts from everybody. I knew the facts because I knew the women; it was in Mexico and it was an English language newspaper, and I said, he's only one small man and we're all terrified of him. He's just a damaged person because people were fleeing town. They were getting roof dogs and putting razor wire on the roofs. He could get in anywhere. The town was in a panic. I prayed the Hail Mary out loud when he was in my bed and he left, and he said, "Stop praying." I said, "I'm praying for you." I thought, "Oh, I should pray for him." Then I did pray for him and then I thought, "Wait a minute. I didn't even pray for myself." I'm praying out loud the Hail Mary and he says, "It's okay. I'm leaving," and he left. I said, "I prayed the Hail Mary. If maybe you'll be smart enough to pray out loud before he rapes you, but he left." They printed it in the paper, people printed it out, they put it in their shops, they memorize it, they carried it. He got caught five days later.

I'm telling you this story because a couple of years after that, my friend writes me and says that there'd been a kidnapping in town. My friend is rich, and it was on her road, and she thinks that it was a mistake that they were going after her. They got this Mexican woman and held her for 24 hours, driving around in this SUV. She remembered reading about the woman who prayed with the rapist. She prayed the Hail Mary and they dropped her off at the corner of her street. My friend said she didn't really believe she just was doing that because she remembered it. I said, "Michelle, believe me, in that moment, she was praying to God."

Mark: That's an amazing, amazing story.

Beverly: Right.

Mark: Is that experience in your new book?

Beverly: It's in my third book called *Astonished*.

Mark: Oh, I didn't read that book.

Beverly: In this book, it plays a part but being a serial memoirist, you have to – I always have been a teenage mother and it's really a big thing for me. That's in all the books but it has to be done differently and shortly. Anyway, it's only shortly done in this one and that was fun doing it in a different way starting in a different place.

Mark: Tell me about your own creative process. I know that you live with books for years and that you start and then they start over. How do you keep the faith in your own creative process?

Beverly: With me, it's always at least 10 years between a book because something has to happen. I don't know if it's I'm a call to writing or addicted to writing, I have to write. For those 10 years, I'm trying to write a book, but nothing's happened yet. I'm casting around and writing essays for here or there. This last one, I kept writing about my childhood not knowing why. Anyway, finally I got it and it was with the grace I took drugs, I did Ayahuasca. I had the beginning of my book because of what happened there and it just like, "Whoa, now I know why I have been writing about my father all this time."

Mark: Can you tell us about that experience with Ayahuasca?

Beverly: Oh, God. I took the drug. First of all, I'm by far the oldest person there. I've completely forgotten to – I'm going into too much detail here. Let me get to the chase. I was told by a friend, I'd never done it before, my friend had done it many times in Peru and stuff and she said, "Get a good seat near the musicians." I go into the room where the ceremony is going to be, there are 30 mattresses lined up with buckets to vomit in and there's a DS where the shaman will sit.

I see the instruments of the musicians and there is one spot across from her next to another spot that has a baseball cap on it. I thought, "Ah, do we really want to spend the night next to a man?" Then I thought, "Dammit, I'm not going to let a man chase me away from the best spot." I take the best spot and I sit there, and we've been told to be silent in the ceremony room. This man comes in and I'd seen him earlier. He stood like this, like a cop on a corner with his legs spread, a big guy with a butch haircut.

He comes in and he starts going – when I saw him, I thought, "I'm staying away from that one." My father's a cop, I have a thing against men, believe me [laughs]. He is there and he starts going, [puffs]. I'm like, "Oh, you're supposed to be silent."

Mark: [laughs]

Beverly: I'm like, "Oh my God, aren't they going to shut him up?" Then he keeps doing it. We go up and we say our intentions and we drink this stuff and it's getting worse. Then he's moaning and I'm just fit to be tied. I'm thinking, "What have I gotten myself into? I'm uncomfortable and everybody else is vomiting and I can't vomit. It's this man and he's violent and he's breathing violently, and I'm stuck next to him. What about me?" You're told to call an angel if you need to go – these helpers to the bathroom. I did. I called her over and she says, "Is that man bothering you? I said, "Yes, he's been doing that [noise]." Anyway, they take him out. Then I'm sitting there, and I'm like, you're supposed to sit up and I'm sitting there and it's horrible. They said that two and a half hours in, the shaman is going to offer a second cup.

She's going to turn on her lamp. She turns on the lamp, and they bring him back in and kneel him in front of her and give him a second cup and put him back on the mattress. I'm like, "Fuck me, fuck this." I turn on my side and I put my pillow over my head and I'm out of here. I'm just, ouch. Then they come and tap me on the shoulder. "The shaman would like to offer you —" "I don't want another shot." [chuckles]

Finally, I start dozing off and I hear him talking. I take the pillow off my head and the shaman's kneeling in front of him, blowing smoke on him, patting him, and whispering, and he's talking back. I think, "Oh, I guess she's giving them a blessing. What if she comes to give me a blessing? I'm full of venom, I couldn't receive it." She stepped right over me and blessed all the 30 other people except me.

[laughter]

Beverly: I'm thinking, "I'm leaving after the sharing circle at 11 o'clock. This was horrible." Then I go out and I see the angel that had taken him out and I said — now it has occurred to me I was raped 15 years ago in my own bed, here's this violent man next to me. I said, "I was raped 15 years ago, and that man was violent." She said, "Well, that man has been violent. In his life, he was having a very hard time." I think, "I don't give a shit if he is having a hard time."

I'm going around telling everybody how horrible the night was, and I can't believe they put me next to this man and he was violent, blah blah blah, and gathering my people. It's all the people who had bad experiences. We go into the sharing circle the next day and we have a talking stick and I'm going to be the last person because they're going clockwise. The man who had been next to me was about six people before me.

He says, "I have believed since I was a child that my father was going to kill me. I have lived my life believing my father is going to kill me. I have a family, I have a wonderful wife, I have a good business, and I'm terrified every day of my life. Last night, I felt such pain I fell, I died, and the angels caught me and said, it's okay, you're safe." He said, "And it left me." He said, "When I came in, I knew this was the time it would have to go, or I die."

Then it's my turn and I start crying and I say, "I'm a control freak. I couldn't control what was going on and I never for one second, not for one second wondered what he was going through. Never for one second did it occur to me to pray for him, to send him love. I'm completely narcissistic. Every morning I wake up and I think God has helped me put somebody before me. I'm so narcissistic, and I fail all the time." I'm weeping.

Now I'm going to stay. The men were so sweet. They all come up and say, "Thank you for being so vulnerable." Then I'm avoiding that guy the whole day. I'm sitting by the fire, and he comes up to me and he says, "Can I talk to you?" I said, "Okay." He said, "I'm really sorry you went through that." I said, "It's not your fault. That was all my stuff." He said, "You know when I came back in the room and saw you lying on your side, I decided I was going to stay up all night to protect you."

Mark: Wow, so amazing. That was for you a real deep, deep yielding for men. It's a beautiful experience.

Beverly: Yes, what a gift. What a gift.

Mark: Has it shifted your--

Beverly: Totally. Well, then, [chuckles] maybe a year later, I did MDMA with a handler and that was another, I'm going to get into that one because I haven't written that one yet. It just gets deeper and deeper. Revelation upon revelation and it's incredible. I'll just say this, my father was a cop, and my father was violent towards me. Not horrible. He was an Italian man with a temper in his generation. He also thought he was protecting me. Trying to control me, to protect me.

Mark: Right, and that's what we do. That's why we turn that on ourselves, too. We're probably mean to ourselves because we're trying to protect ourselves in some way.

Beverly: Right. True.

Mark: You don't always realize that. Well, I know you need to go. I'm so grateful to you.

Beverly: You ask the best questions, and you have such a responsive, eager, receptive face that I always want to be interviewed by you.

Mark: We'll do it again when we have more time. I just want to thank you.