

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Right Relationship: How the Heart Can Also Be Wise

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Mark Matousek: Hello everyone and welcome to this month's edition of The Seekers Forum. I hope you're having a great weekend. Happy Easter, happy Passover for those of you who are Jewish. This is the season of rising again, into new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. Nothing could be more appropriate after 2020 than this season of rising, this season of moving into new ways of being. I hope you've enjoyed your Easter day.

Before we begin let's just have a moment of silence to prepare ourselves for the talk ahead and the writing. 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]

After your next exhalation, gently open your eyes and come into the room in soft focus. Let's say hello to Jay. Hi Jay, how are you?

Jay Koebele: Hey Mark. Doing great. It's always good to be here. Thank you.

Mark: Thank you. We're going to be looking this month at right relationship and how it is that the heart can also be wise. What does it mean to balance the heart and the mind in our interpersonal connections? Whether we're talking about spouses, lovers, friends, community members, finding the equilibrium between our emotions and our reason is utterly essential. Not only because people are difficult and communications is hard, but because relationships are always changing and they require ongoing care and maintenance.

We forget that that relationship that is trying to operate without wisdom is like a one-winged bird that's trying to fly. Without reason to balance out our emotions its connections are very difficult to sustain over a long period of time. Just as reason without emotion is cold and distant, emotion without reason is unreliable, impulsive, and frequently very short-sighted. We're animals with two-sided brains and two-sided hearts. As such, we need this equilibrium. We need this attention to all of our parts.

This sounds obvious, but it's actually quite often overlooked largely because our faith in feelings and emotions as the bottom line of how we operate and what we believe wisdom to be has gotten so out of proportion. We've come to privilege feelings over reason to an unhealthy degree. We idealize the heart and we tend to demonize logic in matters of love, affection, and bonding, as if the head were the enemy somehow, while our emotions are our greatest allies, but this is a huge mistake. As it says in the Talmud, the heart is the seat of the mind. One without the other is insufficient, if not dangerous.

How did we come to idealize emotions in this way and abnegate the importance of logic when it comes to forming our relationships? In large part, this is a pendulum swing away from the very negative attitude toward emotions that prevailed until half a century ago. Before the 1970s, the male-dominated sciences gave very little importance to emotions as a topic of serious investigation. They carried very little weight in our understanding of psychology or ethical behavior. In fact, they were held in contempt as necessary evil to be tolerated, but not indulge.

As B.F. Skinner, the behaviorist, put it, "We all know that emotions are useless and bad for our peace of mind." That was the final word in science for a long time, that emotions were this non-important thing that was bad for your mental health, bad for your physical health, and really to be put aside as much as possible as utterly undependable and without merit.

Considering that, it's not hard to understand how sexism emerged and our denigration of females as emotional creatures, less evolved than rational cerebral males. What happened is that we built an entire civilization around this mistaken idea that emotions are a liability, not only for women but also for men. It took a woman to turn this around, which is what Carol Gilligan did in 1970s, the psychologist who developed what she called the ethic of care. What they discovered is that emotions actually underlie our morality. The way we've developed as ethical beings, not reason, emotions are the bedrock of our moral compass, you could say.

That ethic of care that Gilligan developed revolutionized our understanding of human life and behavior and relationships, so that relationships became more equity-based, infusing more feminine wisdom into the ideal of relationships. Things began to tilt in the other direction. Men were told to discover our inner feminine, women held us to account and this reckoning with emotions was important, it was vital and absolutely necessary; but like all good things taken to an extreme, it began to tilt in the other direction and have unforeseen consequences.

Culturally, everything became about having your feelings, trust your feelings, follow your intuition. Don't listen to your head, stay with your gut, that's your best guide. The question is, is it our best guide? That's what we're going to be looking at today. The short answer is that if emotions aren't infused with the clarifying organizing effect of reason, they are not our best guide. In fact, they can be our worst enemies. If we forget about bias, if we imagine that our feelings are pure and unfiltered and fair and therefore irrefutable and not to be questioned, it seems fairly obvious that we are in big trouble. Because when you look at the world today, a huge amount of our suffering comes from letting our feelings run us and not pausing to step outside this torrent of emotions to consider our responses before we act out, and before we can become destructive and alienating and cruel in relationships.

That's what we see in the world today. We see everybody bouncing around on their emotional triggers, so to speak, absolutely sure that they're right because they can feel it. That's the big deception because there are lots of things that we can feel that are terrible and unethical. The last time you wanted to walk out on your family because someone was driving you crazy. The last time you wanted to do something self-harming because you were having a bad day. We don't just trust those emotions but looking into the world, what we see is emotionalism run amok.

You obviously saw the capital riots in Washington; there was lots of feelings there, greed in business, crimes of passion, all forms of revenge. If you ask most people in these situations, they will tell you that they're right, because they can feel it. They feel justified in their heart and gut that what they're doing has merit, that it is correct. That's because emotion for anatomical and psychological reasons I can't explain, not being a doctor, but emotions come with a kind of press agent in the brain that explains them to us. Our emotions argue their own case for us, you could say.

The emotional part of us is a brilliant conman. That's because we love to feel emotion. We like to feel like we like to eat and we like to breathe and we like to have sex, we like to pray and have deep conversations. Human beings love to feel, it's the most ancient part of who we are. But emotions use the cloak of reason to disguise the absence of actual logic.

That really is the point that we're focused on today. That in the absence of logic and the absence of facts, emotions create stories to justify and explain themselves. That's because, once again, there's a part of the brain that is the story-making part of the brain whose job it is to spin our out-of-control feelings into solid reasonable-sounding narratives, it's part of how

we navigate through the world. It's also of course, how emotions blind us. Those same emotions that ruin the world, that have the potential for causing so much suffering in the world also ruin our relationships unless we apply the power of reason, the power of the logical mind.

Remember, we are wired for survival, for possession, for territorialism, for jealousy, for competition. We're not wired for happiness. Any evolutionary psychologists will tell you that, we are not wired for happiness, we're wired for survival. Happiness depends on our ability to reason, to use this uniquely human faculty of the frontal lobe to guide us through the jungle of emotion and help us to make more positive choices. That's what we're doing as seekers. Very often, we are using our higher faculties to transcend nature, you could say, in order to move into a new way of being and learn things that are not based on primitive infantile survival needs.

Now, in order to help the frontal lobe help us in relationships, it helps to understand the basic wiring itself and how it is that we bond and attach in relationships. It gives us insight into why we behave the way we do. Attachment is just like breathing and walking and eating. As this month's guest interview, Amir Levine says, attachment is what we do, it's who we are. It's a biological imperative. It's inseparable from what it means to be a human being.

As such, attachment brings up our deepest feelings, so deep that many people can't tolerate the survival-based reflexes that come up in deep relationships. All of us have known highly accomplished intelligent people who could tolerate stress in any part of their life but when it came to personal relationships, they just can't engage. That's because it's so threatening at that primal level. Relationships are our greatest emotional challenge because they are our greatest obsession.

Amir Levine talks about three different types of attachment and how styles of how we bond with one another that are worth looking at for a moment. They are the secure attachment, the avoidant attachment, and the anxious attachment. The avoidant person is the one who has trouble committing, who withdraws when people get too close. The avoidant person is dominated by this feeling of needing to be independent, and they can be ambivalent and claustrophobic in relationship. That's the avoidant type.

The anxious type is someone who holds on too tight, who's over vigilant, who's afraid of losing the person. Anxious attachment types are dominated by feelings of insecurity and mistrust and rejection waiting to happen. Very often, anxious types engineer their own abandonment in relationships in the way of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Finally, the secure type, which is over half of us, is what it sounds like – it's secure. It's folks who have had good enough care as kids, enough attention, sufficient bonding, and connection to know that they belong in the world. People with secure attachment are comfortable being alone because they know that people aren't going to disappear, thus they're able to enjoy their own solitude.

Now, the right relationship requires that we know our patterns and that we sharpen our awareness around the parts of ourselves that need to be self-corrected. If an anxious person, for example, wishes to become secure, he doesn't do this by trusting his feelings, which are all about catastrophe and pain, and keeping in a state of high alert. He does this by finding skillful means of addressing his temperament and his wounding, paying attention not to

overreact, and preserving the health of his connections with the other person, rather than indulging in fears and being swept away by the anxiety that they don't quite understand.

Of course, this is what's known as civilization. It's interrupting our infantile tendencies to choose a happier and more cooperative way to live. Our character is a combination of nature and nurture. Some people are born anxious, some people become anxious. Some people are born avoidant, others become avoidant. In terms of human survival, it paid for us to be diverse, to be heterogeneous, for there to be different kinds of people. Because if everyone, for example, were secure in a population in a dangerous world, and there was nobody over vigilant looking for danger on the horizon, it would be easier to slaughter the entire village. We need avoidant anxious types in our own evolution as a species to stay alive.

The problem is that that wiring, that ancient Paleolithic wiring, is still operating in us and gets triggered in our contemporary situations. The important takeaway from this is that everything can't be blamed on our childhood. That's another one of the great misunderstandings, like, "Trust your feelings all the time," believing that how we bond is a straight line between that situation and how we were raised, which is not the case. There are people who were raised in secure homes, who are nonetheless extremely anxious and insecure. There are folks who were raised in terrible situations who somehow have a balance within themselves, they're able to find their own power, their own poise in the midst of a lot of commotion. That can be temperamental as well as circumstantial.

Most of us are, in fact, a combination of many factors with certain tendencies being predominant. This can be extremely confusing. For example, I am someone who was born with an introvert's temperament. I enjoy a lot of space, I need to be on my own a lot but I was raised in a house where there was a lot of abandonment, rejection, and trauma. So I developed an anxious way of attaching in my life that I could never understand because part of me, a deep part of me wanted to be on my own, and the other part of me was clinging. It took me up until I was in my 40s with a lot of therapy to understand what was this push and pull in me, why did I want to be on my own as well as holding on too tightly to the people in my life? It was something that I needed to unwind for myself. Once I did that, and I understood my basic mechanism, I became a better friend, a better brother, a better son, a better partner. Because I understood what was working me. You can't harmonize with another person if you don't know your own range and rhythms, if you don't understand your basic heart and mind.

I saw this dynamic at work recently with a couple of women I know. I'll call them Laurie and Lisa. Lisa fell in love with a guy who Laurie can't stand. It has become a real issue in their relationship. Laurie talks about hating this guy for reasons that she can't really explain. She says, "It's just something about him, he gives me the creeps." Lisa and her boyfriend are very happy. Everyone else in her life is very, very fond of her new beau, who's done everything he can to win Laurie over, but with no luck. When asked why she doesn't like him, Laurie says things like she doesn't trust him, he seems unsavory, something about his energy, all very reasonable-sounding feelings.

If a single other person shared them, they might have more validity. The fact is only Laurie dislikes this guy and the way she talks about him is very telling, the ammunition that she uses to justify her dislike: he's unshaven, he's macho, he wears sweatpants much of the time, he admitted to Lisa that he sometimes watches porn. These were things that Laurie, who tends to be rigid and a bit prim, simply could not tolerate. She's so identified with her feelings, with their own aversion that she can't see around them or under them or over them. Instead, she

just refuses to spend time with Lisa and her boyfriend, which is understandably driving a wedge into their relationship.

Now, if Laurie were willing to consider the possibility that her feelings about Lisa's boyfriend have very little to do with him and everything to do with her own history, she could make a lot of progress. If she looked at the ways she has been with men in the past, her own protectiveness toward Lisa, her sexual moralism, even her aesthetic, she could bring insight to this situation and distinguish between a bad look and a bad person. She can't make that distinction. If she could, she could begin to forgive Lisa's boyfriend for being a mess and instead set the intention to get over herself instead of risking her friendship with one of her dearest friends.

In order to get over herself, she would need to understand the source of her own aversion and how her mind was dressing up her aversion in all kinds of moralistic stories that actually hold very little water when examined closely. She could also take a moment to look at her own attachment style. Laurie too suffers from anxious attachment. She's been that way since she was very little, she says. Partly because she didn't have model parents, but also partly because that was just who she was. She said that she was born controlling and so that's what she came in with. She holds on tight, she doesn't trust easily. Many of her feelings and preoccupations are fear based. She needs things to be just so. So, is it any surprise that Laurie can't stand Lisa's six foot two, sweat suit, porn watching boyfriend? Why does he make her skin crawl? It's obvious.

If we suggested that to Laurie, who happens to be a Yogi and a Buddhist, she would very likely reject it because that's not how it feels to her. That's not how it feels. She isn't being judgmental, she would say, her gut is telling her that something is wrong. That's when our primitive emotion gets clothed in moralistic garb and poses as the truth driving a wedge between us and other people, making it impossible to see one another clearly and to balance the heart and our powerful emotions with the modulating power of the mind.

I'd like us now to do a fifteen minute writing. Jay, can we pull up the card? I'd like you please to take fifteen minutes now to describe something that you feel to be wrong that cannot be justified with facts. Something you feel to be wrong, but it can't really be justified with facts. What is the emotion that's driving this judgment? Be as specific as you can be. We'll take fifteen minutes and we'll come back together as a group.

[pause]

One more minute, please.

[pause]

Let's start to finish up.

[pause]

Let's come back together as a group. Welcome back. Put the writing aside for the moment. So how was this for you, identifying a place of judgment or aversion, moralism, that feels justified but when you look at it more closely actually doesn't hold much water? It's a great way of understanding how moral dumbfounding works, which is what it's called in psychology. We're dumbfounded when we look underneath our opinions and these

judgments and these feelings to discover that there's no actual logic behind them, we can't explain them. It's just something that we feel, and those are some of our most dangerous responses.

In closing, let me just say, this isn't about suppressing our emotions, not at all. Emotions can be very useful guides. They can be quite trustworthy sometimes, but there are other times when they absolutely can't be and that's why reason and logic need to be on the alert as well, need to be present. Just as sometimes logic is a great way of moving through a difficulty in a relationship or bringing more balance, and other times logic is a great way of closing our hearts. We can talk ourselves out of our feelings and close our hearts down and tell all kinds of stories about why we should never let anyone close to us.

It's got to be a balance of both, but when we do get that, we realize that we don't have to be dominated by our emotions anymore. We no longer have to allow ourselves simply to be flooded by them and carried away by our emotions. In fact, there is something in us that's larger than our emotions that has the ability to look at them with wisdom, with clarity, and then choose how to respond.