

The Art of Asking Everything

Elizabeth Lesser: Everything Is Bullshit

Amanda Palmer [00:33]

Welcome to the inaugural episode of The Art of Asking Everything. First of all, I want to give you some background on this podcast. I had the idea to do this back in 2018. And then, I went on tour and started interviewing all kinds of people from all over the world: doctors and sex workers and writers, musicians, activists, TED speakers, the whole nine yards. I talked to anyone who wanted to have a deep and interesting conversation. And then, just when I was getting ready to release the first season of the podcast, coronavirus happened. And so, here we are, six months later, finally launching this. The podcast is going to come out every Tuesday, and then I'm going to have live follow-up conversations with the guests to talk about where things are at right now, given that I did a lot of these interviews before COVID. All of these podcasts are going to be ad-free and brand-free and endorsement-free and free to the public, basically, because I am supported by 15,000 people on Patreon. And if you find yourself enjoying this podcast and you want to support it, please do. It's about a dollar a month or more to join Patreon, and it makes this all possible.

So, here we are. This is it. Episode #1. I recorded this interview with the writer Elizabeth Lesser in mid-August of 2019, in my and her hometown of Woodstock, New York. Yes, that Woodstock. Home of scented candles and comfy sandals and disillusioned Bob Dylan fans. When I first moved to Woodstock about six years ago, I heard about this place nearby called the Omega Institute, which was this summer season center for yoga and meditation, and wellness retreats, and writing workshops, and stuff like that, and my first thought was, eh, people with sage and crystals, sandals and candles, run away, run away.

But then, I heard that the woman who started it back in the '70s, Elizabeth Lesser, lived right down the street from me and that she'd written a book, called *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*. So, I went to our local bookstore and I bought it, and in the first few pages, I was completely sucked in. The book was about her life completely falling apart. It was about what happened when she had an affair. It was about piecing her soul back together after a divorce. It was about motherhood, and I loved this book. I fell in love with her without even having met her. I got her phone number from a friend, and I asked her if she would be on this podcast. But before we even recorded this interview, she delighted in hearing from me because she had heard about me, too. She invited me over to her house. She gave me and my son, Ash, who was 3 at the time, some muffins, and she became my friend.

Now, this woman had my dream life on paper. When Elizabeth Lesser was in her 20s, she started an actual commune, and this was in the '60s. And I have always been so fucking jealous of these people. It was my dream all throughout my teen years and my 20s to start a commune somewhere with some crazy, freaky artist people. But I have to say, Elizabeth set me straight on my fantasies during this interview.

In the time since we recorded this, Elizabeth has also written and released a new book, called [Cassandra Speaks: When Women Are the Storytellers, the Human Story Changes](#). Need I say more? This is the woman that we need right now, and it's why I chose her for the first episode of this podcast. I hope you love listening to this interview as much as I loved doing it. Please welcome your new friend and mine, Elizabeth Lesser.

(Music Break)

Elizabeth Lesser, thank you so much for being on my podcast. I just finished reading both of your books. And I remember getting this book and looking at the cover. It's blue, it says Broken Open, there's a little bird flying into the sky, and I was like, oh, my god, what if I don't like it? (Laughter) And then, I...and I started reading it and within four pages, I just got that like, flood of excitement that it was possible that this amazing person who wrote this amazing book might actually want to be my friend. And I was so excited because I just saw a kindred person who really wanted to tell the truth about what it feels like to be human. And you were so raw and immediately vulnerable and open and truthful and unapologetically personal on the page that I was like, oh, my god, I've found one of my people.

Elizabeth Lesser [05:38]

You know, I remember when I first started writing my first book.

Amanda Palmer [05:43]

What was the name of that book?

Elizabeth Lesser [05:44]

[The Seeker's Guide](#), and people would say, oh, my god, I feel like that. You wrote what I think. And at first, I thought, no, I want to write something new and exciting and what no one has thought. But then I realized that's the deepest compliment that like, I spoke to your heart. We found each other. My book is me out in the world, an emissary. We found each other. We fell in love.

Amanda Palmer [06:16]

Yeah, that's a really interesting thing because when I was a young songwriter, especially like, you know, in my early 20s, mid-20s, I kind of felt the same way. I wanted to make this music that just felt uniquely me and was just pouring out of my heart, unedited, and really honest. It didn't occur to me that by doing that, if I did it well enough, it would have some kind of universal resonance with the other 25-year-old girl from Wisconsin or England or Japan, who listened to it and went, oh my god, she's putting words and voice to these feelings that I've had that I've never spoken. I didn't know that's what I was doing. I just thought that I was trying to make some kind of honest expression onto the canvas of the world. It was...to me, it wasn't about connection back then. And then I kind of figured it out.

Elizabeth Lesser [07:15]

Yeah, isn't that like the great mystery? [Jung](#) said, "you spend the first half of your life developing a healthy ego, and then you spend the second half, if you're so inclined, letting go of that ego." And I don't know if it's an age thing. I don't think by first and second half, he meant like, you hit 45 and then...but it's more you need that healthy sense of self to create. And young people tend to have a little more of the narcissistic urge to be seen as unique. What you just described, that sense of, oh, if I be my authentic self, then I'm one with others, that's such a mystery. Fully be me, oh, and then I'm you, too.

Amanda Palmer [08:04]

In your memoir [Broken Open](#) and also in the memoir that followed it, which is also incredibly beautiful...it's called [Marrow](#) and it's about love and connection and authenticity, and it's sort of threaded together through the story of your sister's cancer and the sort of exchange that you went through when you were her bone marrow donor...you share so much personal information about yourself, about your relationships, about your ex, about your family history, about your difficult troubles with your mom and your dad. And I'm sitting there turning every page going, thank you. Oh, my god, someone who's really putting it on the page and being really open. But the writer in me, the songwriter in me, the blogger, the journalist type goes like, oh, my god, like, when does Elizabeth Lesser get into

trouble in her own life? Because I know I've gotten into deep trouble and have had to hit a lot of hurdles, walls, boundaries, trap landmines.

And I mean, I remember this point in my mid-30s, where casual acquaintances who really liked me who I'd had dinner with or hung out with, would call me the next day and say "Amanda, that thing I told you yesterday about my relationship or about my vocal surgery. I hope it doesn't sound weird, but can you not write about that? Could you not put that in your blog?" And I just felt this shame of like, god, does everyone feel unsafe around me? Because I love talking about my experiences and the stories and the things that happen. And all of a sudden, I kind of shrank back. I thought, wait, am I...am I sacrificing my relationships and my friendships on the altar of memoir and art? And I saw [Elizabeth Gilbert](#) give a great talk in Australia. This was maybe six years ago. And she said something that I will never forget that gets to the core of this. She said, every writer is waiting for someone to die.

Elizabeth Lesser [10:11]

Yeah. (Laughter)

Amanda Palmer [10:12]

(Laughter) And I was like, yes, totally. I know exactly who I'm waiting to die. Tell me about that in your life and what you've had to learn.

Elizabeth Lesser [10:20]

First of all, yes, this is a huge question. It's a huge question for anyone who wants to write anything true, whether you call it memoir or not. And to me, it's a huge question just about being alive, being human. How much do you tell? What is the truth? What do you owe to the people in your life? What don't you owe? What will help? What won't? So, these are all huge questions, but it started for me because I have many aspects to myself, as everyone does.

One, I would say first and foremost, I'm what for lack of a better word you would call a spiritual seeker. And what those words mean to me, they're loaded with all sorts of crap that are misunderstood, but what it means to me is, I want to understand how to live here on this earth as a good, creative, kind, vibrant, fully alive person who is not wasting this life, and who helps other people live their life. I've always wanted it, from the moment I was a little kid. It's like, what are we doing here? How'd we get here? Where do we go when we die? And what do I do in between those two bookends? I just want to know. And that's what inspired me to help start Omega Institute, which is...offers retreats and workshops and trainings for therapists, for seekers, for people who want to be healthy, who want to heal. It's what my writing's all about. So, when I started to write my first book, I hate quote unquote, self-help books and spiritual books that use the royal 'we' all the time. Or let me tell you the story about my client Gene. And there's this distancing and I want to know, yeah, but what about you, author person?

Amanda Palmer [12:22]

Oh, yeah.

Elizabeth Lesser [12:23]

What happened when these theories of how to be healthy and how to love better and how to wake up and keep the demons at bay? What did you do?

(Music Break)

Amanda Palmer [12:49]

I had another conversation with [Wayne Muller](#), who was one of my co-teachers when I, a couple of weeks ago, led a retreat at Omega. And Wayne is in his late 60s. He's a therapist. He's also, I'm sure he would consider himself, a seeker. And I asked him this same question. And you know, you guys are also of a different vintage. You know, I was born in 1976. I sort of grew up in the '80s and '90s. My parents were not really...I wouldn't define them as spiritual seekers. But there's also this question of like, you know, I grew up with one foot in each camp, right? I had my super like, nice, normal sort of liberal Lexington upbringing. And then I had this weird guy, Anthony, coming in from left field who was like, yeah, there's something more out there. I'm going to teach you about yoga and meditation and Buddhism and compassion. And here's a bunch of books you might want to seek. But I had [learned] from the cultural Kool-Aid I was drinking at the time, I had a real allergy to the self-help section and that...that world.

Elizabeth Lesser [13:56]

Why?

Amanda Palmer [13:57]

Because it felt bullshit. It felt disingenuous. And maybe it was the bad marketing. Maybe it was the stupid book covers. Or maybe it really was that there was a critical mass of actual bullshit people in that world who just seemed inauthentic to me. But that also sort of made it difficult because in my 20s, I wanted to seek. I was really into the ideas of Buddhism and practicing yoga and going on retreats, but I kind of had to compartmentalize it, because my other self saw all of those things as kind of inherently uncool. And I didn't want to wind up in Woo Land or self-help land because so much of it seemed like a shitty place to be.

I think the question I have for you is like, you know, you've started this amazing retreat center where a lot of these people teach, gather, exchange ideas, but how do you ride the line because you don't seem to me to be at all in the camp of you know, Woo bullshit inauthenticity. You're the opposite. You just seem like a totally embodied, honest, authentic self. What do you do with all of the rest of that world? Of like, really full of themselves yoga teachers and spiritual teachers who are actually unkind, sexist assholes? How do you deal with all that and how do you parse it? The most important question, how do you keep the door open so that other people can actually come into this beautiful place of seeking without being so noxiously turned off by like all of the sage burning?

Elizabeth Lesser [15:47]

I live in that question because I have a terrible allergy to bullshit, but bullshit is ubiquitous. There are bullshit, sexist, asshole musicians.

Amanda Palmer [16:00]

Oh, I know!

Elizabeth Palmer [16:01]

There are bullshit, sexist, asshole academics, intellectuals, sports people. You name it.

Amanda Palmer [16:10]

Plumbers! Shoe salesmen!

Elizabeth Lesser [16:11]

Bullshit...bullshit is everywhere. When you are in an industry, let's call it the self-help spirituality industry, the problem with bullshit there is that it's a supposedly anti-bullshit...

Amanda Palmer [16:25]

Industry.

Elizabeth Lesser [16:26]

...industry. It's like this is about being true to yourself and being loving and compassionate. It's the same thing that happens when a priest screws a little boy. There's a sharper sword seeking out the integrity of anyone who dares to say my work is about being a better person and helping you be a better person. Yeah, but you're a jerk. This...

Amanda Palmer [16:50]

(Laughter)

Elizabeth Lesser [16:50]

...when I first started noticing how many of the teachers coming to Omega were, quote unquote jerks like, i.e. the relationship teacher who's on his fourth marriage. The monk who ends up sleeping with somebody's wife at the workshop. I started Omega when I was 23 years old, and it began to dawn on me in my late 20s, the tremendous contradictions that were going on.

Amanda Palmer [17:20]

Well, and yet the more I see this, the more it actually makes sense because these are the people, these seeking people, they're the people who need it. Anthony used to have this great quote. He used to say, therapists are people who need 40 hours of therapy a week.

Elizabeth Lesser [17:38]

Uh-hum. Yeah, there's a sign at the retreat center in California called [Esalen](#), that place in Big Sur. It says, "I teach what I most need to learn and I am my worst student."

Amanda Palmer [17:50]

(Laughter) Yeah.

Elizabeth Lesser [17:51]

To me, that is the sign of a good self-help or spiritual teacher. Admitting upfront, and we're getting back to your question of why do I reveal so much in my memoirs, the one who upfront says look, I'm a few steps ahead of you on the path because I have made so many mistakes. But I'm constantly looking at myself. Why did I make that mistake? Can I do it differently? Does everybody make that mistake? It's the self-inquiry that counts. The point is not to become a perfect saint. The point is to become an honest, authentic, kind, slowed-down-in-reactivity human being.

Amanda Palmer [18:37]

Better seeker.

Elizabeth Lesser [18:38]

Yeah.

Amanda Palmer [18:39]

Yeah. I mean, it is the thing that attracted me most to my mentor Anthony, who I write about in my memoir, and I talk about a lot of the people who follow my community watched me go through his own cancer battle and bone marrow transplant and eventual death. And he was the best teacher because he was incredibly flawed, you know, and when he was at his best, he was very open and honest about how flawed he was and tempted he was and how angry and sometimes unreasonable he was. But he was always able, at enough moments, to get outside of himself, sometimes with me holding his hand,

sometimes with him holding mine. He was always inquiring, and that's what drew me towards him as a mentor.

Elizabeth Lesser [19:28]

Most of the people who I've gotten to know who teach beautiful workshops and retreats, trainings at Omega, are like that. And I think part of the allergy people have toward this kind of work is part true reactivity to bullshit, but it's also, it's threatening. It's threatening to look at oneself. And so, you look at something like Omega, and you open the catalog. To me, I would say to someone who's like, uh-uh, this is bullshit, to say, yeah and what is threatening you here? What about this work where you might have to look at a choice you made, a life you might have to unravel to feel fully alive, like it's threatening? So, it's a lot easier to say, those people are full of themselves than to say, yikes! I might want to do something like that.

Amanda Palmer [20:26]

I find myself looking through the Omega catalog or the catalog of, you know, somewhere like [Esalen](#), which is a retreat center on the West Coast, or [Kripalu](#), which is this yoga hotel in Massachusetts. I'm a seeker and I look at those descriptions and pictures of perfectly blonde smiling people in beautiful clothes.

Maybe it is a marketing problem. These people really are presenting, sort of like Instagram and the internet, it's like these people are presenting a perfectly filtered picture of, I have it all together. Come to me and I will guide you and help you. Man, if I could help take over the marketing of all spiritual seeking and make it look a lot messier, which everyone knows, like, anyone who's gone into this work, anyone who really goes to therapy, anyone who really does a hardcore meditation practice or yoga, knows how fucking messy it is. It never looks like that picture in the catalogue. You're never floating through a field with flowers in your hair with some incense in your hand going, like, I'm finding God. That's not what it is. It's a shit show. It's hard. You're snotty and crying and frustrated and angry and you want to kill your parents and like, all of this stuff is coming up and like, why isn't that picture in the catalog? It's like on this side, you've got heavy metal. And on this side, you've got the spiritual catalogs. And I know and you know that life is actually in the middle. It isn't all fire and brimstone and hellhounds, but it also isn't people peacefully sitting in fields of dandelions on meditation cushions with it all figured out.

Elizabeth Lesser [22:10]

It is, uh, why, um - you're hired! (Laughter)

Amanda Palmer [22:11]

(Laughter) All right. I'm quitting my day job, everyone. This is the last podcast I'm ever gonna do. I'm gonna do the catalogue.

Elizabeth Lesser [22:20]

I mean, I'm... I think the main reason I started writing books is because I was able to say whatever I want and make it be real, and I didn't have to get anybody to come and fill a seat and travel to Omega and do this thing. It's what... had nothing to do with marketing. And so, I live now mostly as an author, and other fabulous people run Omega, and it's an enormous relief not to be in the world of selling something.

Amanda Palmer [22:52]

You and me both. Ever since I started my Patreon, my relief at the pie chart in my head is a lot more making and a lot less, how am I going to sell this?

Elizabeth Lesser [23:04]

Yeah, because if you run a business and we have a staff of 300 people, we're responsible to the people who want to take the workshops and the teachers we're paying and suddenly it's like, oh, my god, this is an enormous business. And we have to keep it going. Is it serving people? Yes. Is it caught in the American Dream machine? Yeah. Oh, whoops.

(Music Break)

Amanda Palmer [23:36]

[Esther Perel](#), who's also our neighbor and writes books about relationships and sex and love, she said something really interesting that has been resonating around in my head for the past few weeks. She says a relationship can often be made better by sharing less. And I hear that and I go, oh no, that's not true. Like you need to be able to share everything. That's a real relationship, when you can communicate every last piece of shitty shit and like the most uncomfortable, embarrassing, awkward things. And I also hear my teenage self screaming for radical honesty and knowing that that can't be the full truth. You know, I instinctively know there's this wisdom in what Esther is saying. And I mean, you've been through so many iterations of yourself as a writer and then as a receiver once your books go out into the world. You know, where do you find yourself drawing the line on any given day between, I must share, and if that means maybe throwing something under the bus, so be it, and no, I must withhold to protect.

Elizabeth Lesser [24:45]

There are big chunks of storylines in my books that are missing because I knew I could not go there. I will not share this. In *Broken Open* which is...the subtitle of the book is, *How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*. So, I started out thinking I would tell a lot of other people's stories and within minutes of really beginning the book, I realized, I got to tell my story, okay, the how I learned my lessons about finding the gold in the ashes of your life falling apart, I got to tell that. And so, it was my divorce, it was coming into my body through an affair when I was still married, and it was the difficulty of what it means to let go of the dream of a family. And there are parts of that story, to save any shred of hope that I might have any relationship left with my ex-husband, that I did not tell. I always feel shitty that I didn't tell it, but glad I didn't. I feel that missing hole in the book. I took a lot of hits that I didn't deserve because I didn't want to tell some of the things he had done.

Amanda Palmer [26:05]

When you say you took a lot of hits, you mean in your social circle? In your community?

Elizabeth Lesser [26:09]

No. No. In the way I presented myself to the world in the book.

Amanda Palmer [26:16]

You showed your flaws, but you couldn't show his?

Elizabeth Lesser [26:17]

That's right. Other people have said to me, Well, you kind of get a feeling of what was going on.

Amanda Palmer [26:22]

You get a couple little pokes in there.

Elizabeth Lesser [26:25]

Little pokes, but I wanted to...I wanted to tell more.

Amanda Palmer [26:26]

You wanted a javelin.

Elizabeth Lesser [26:28]

I did, but I knew, okay, that's not my story to tell. I can tell my story. And of course, it bleeds into the other people's stories, but as much as possible, I cannot tell his story, or in the case of *Marrow* when I was writing about being my sister's bone marrow donor, it was not her story I was telling. It was my story. And people have actually faulted me for that. They're like I wanted more of her story. I'm like, well, first of all, she was dying. I can't tell her story, and now she's dead. I can't tell her story. Things about her own life and some of the decisions she made that I feel were key to what made her sick, and what kept her sick, I couldn't tell. I didn't want to hurt her children who are still alive. I didn't want to hurt her husband. You can kind of gather some stuff, but it wasn't mine to tell.

Amanda Palmer [27:23]

Well, as someone who read both books, and especially *Broken Open* you can feel what's missing, and you know. You can feel the restraint, and you, especially when you're talking about an explosive divorce. If you're ever wondering whether you come across looking like the failed one or the wrong one, and the husband, your ex comes across looking like an angel, it looks pretty even because you can feel the restraint, ultimately, like the grace and the restraint that you have to not tell the story that you obviously know.

And a good writer, I think, lets the reader know, with whatever subtexts, dog whistle, there's all this shit that I'm never going to be allowed to tell you. And there is a grace in that. I actually read a memoir, I'll do the graceful thing right now and not throw the writer under the bus, a memoir by a female musician, and it came out some years ago and...and she wrote it, just having broke up with her husband of many, many, many, many years. And they had a child together, and it was clearly a vicious knockdown, fuck you-level divorce. And this was her big memoir, you know, only and ever-published book and you open it up. The score-settling vitriol begins on page three. The intake of breath where I was like, this is not a good look. I wish I could have like, shaken you and said like, wait five years, because your big memoir is not a place to like, settle the score with your evil ex. Even if what he did was shitty, you don't come across well.

And I had to pull a bunch of things out of my own memoir. Me and my editor, we literally had shorthand for it, and he would hand me back a paragraph and be like, you're score settling. You know, you're...like, you can't settle any scores in this fucking book, Amanda. And I was like, can't I just settle one? Just this little one? Nope.

Elizabeth Lesser [29:42]

Well, because your book and mine, I dare to say, had a, I'm gonna use the word higher purpose, than just telling your story. The purpose wasn't just, here's what I did. Here's how this person screwed me over. Here's how I was a really good person, you know. It was, hey, people, life is so confusing. We're in it together. I'm writing this and telling you my story so that maybe we could help each other along the way. That is why I wrote the book. That's why I was honest. It wasn't fun all the time. I didn't want to say all those things. I always say, the book made me do it. I always kept at the front, will this serve people? Or is this somehow like, promoting me as some cool person or some wise person? Okay, don't do that. It will be obvious. Or is this settling a score? And I was always shaving those things off with *Broken Open*, It didn't happen with *Marrow*. I think I was writing *Broken Open* at a time in publishing when there'd been some of those memoirs written that were lies. So, what happened was, the publishing companies actually made you show the manuscript, pre-publishing, to the main people in the book to say, did this happen? Do you approve? I didn't have to do that after that one.

Amanda Palmer [31:12]

I did that with my book, maybe out of respect, but also, I didn't want anyone to open up that book and be surprised or angry. So, every little mini story about an ex-boyfriend, about a friend, about my family, I would send them those paragraphs and say, does this feel true enough to you? Did I represent you? And also, fact checking, like, I got my ex-boyfriend's university wrong. He was like, wrong university. And I was like, oh, shit. Okay. I'll fix that. And then actually, when I published it, I wasn't holding my breath in fear that I was going to get a phone call saying like, oh, my god, you really fucked me over in your book, because I had done all of the fact checking due diligence ahead of time.

Elizabeth Lesser [31:58]

One of my favorite letters that I have saved, and actually go back and read often, is from one of my son's best friends. Part of *Broken Open* is about raising kids and being broken open by being a parent.

Amanda Palmer [32:14]

Slam ball.

Elizabeth Lesser [32:15]

Slam ball. Well, that's the story.

Amanda Palmer [32:17]

Oh, my god!

Elizabeth Lesser [32:18]

I sent the slam ball story to--

Amanda Palmer [32:20]

Which is just so...if you haven't read the book and you will go read the book, because it's so good, there's this great chapter about parenting, and how Elizabeth lets her entire living room just get taken over, completely taken over and physically rearranged by feral teenage boys.

Elizabeth Lesser [32:37]

Yeah.

Amanda Palmer [32:38]

And it's so beautiful. And then she ultimately reclaims her power.

Elizabeth Lesser [32:42]

And point of the story is that when I was getting divorced, I had so much guilt and shame, that I just have to let my sons do whatever they want because I have screwed up their lives so profoundly. And it took me a while to get the message, that would not help them. I was not giving them any goodness by having no boundaries. So, the slam ball story is about that, but when I sent it to my older son and his friend, I got this letter back from his friend, just like, "No, it wasn't a four-foot court. It was a 3.8-foot court and the ball wasn't red. It was green." And I just loved that.

(Music Break)

Amanda Palmer [33:36]

You broke out of a certain kind of family and a certain kind of way of living and went into another. And then it seems to me you hopped from cage to cage kind of. I mean, you started this community when you were 23. You were married. You definitely talk in *Broken Open* about sort of falling in behind your husband, who from the sound of it was this super charismatic leader, you know, and a lot of what comes across beautifully in your books is you can look back and see how incredibly sexist the world

you were raised in was even if you couldn't quite see it at 23. Were you guys thinking about sexism back then? Or was it just not the topic du jour because you were just working on back to the land spirituality. Here's our leader. What do you see has changed?

Elizabeth Lesser [34:37]

Um. Fabulous. I have always been thinking about sexism.

Amanda Palmer [34:41]

Thank Christ. Someone's got to.

Elizabeth Lesser [34:46]

Always. I was raised by a mother, who, that early feminist book...

Amanda Palmer [34:53]

You talk about how it shows up on her bedside, and it's something about like...

Elizabeth Lesser [34:57]

Yeah. It's the famous one that described the insanity that '50s mothers mothering and working in the 1950s were feeling. My mother was a feminist, but unable to activate it in any way except complaining bitterly about it. My father was a congenial tyrant. It was his way or the highway. He had really cool ways. You know, he was an outdoorsman. He was a Madison Avenue ad man. He was a Mad Man, but he also was a hiker and a skier and a vegetable gardener. And we were like, his hired hands. He had four daughters and my mother. And my grandmother and great-aunt lived with us. So, it was this female home...

Amanda Palmer [35:44]

All ovaries.

Elizabeth Lesser [35:45]

...with the leader being my father who had enormous disdain for women and for girly stuff and for talking too much and for emotions and for crying. So, on the one hand, we were raised to be very strong and to be his boys. And then there was my mother, who was very active in civil rights and very active in the anti-war movement against Vietnam. I was getting all sorts of messages. One, don't be a girl. Girls will never get ahead in the world. Be strong. You can do whatever you want. And I was getting from my mother things like, we have to do what your father says. Why? Why? I was always the one saying, why? Why do we have to do what he says? Look, we're all these women and girls. Why does he get to say it?

Amanda Palmer [36:35]

You wanted to unionize. (Laughter)

Elizabeth Lesser [36:36]

I wanted to unionize. I tried to unionize.

Amanda Palmer [36:37]

You wanted to mutiny. (Laughter)

Elizabeth Lesser [36:38]

And they...and my sisters were all terrified of my unionizing, and...because my father was pretty fierce. But my mother would say, look, men rule the world but they're babies and I'd be like, wait a second. This does not add up. Why, if men are babies, should they rule the world? So, your question, was I

thinking about feminism when I got my guru, who was like a truly sexist person, married my husband, sexist, and neither my husband nor my guru were bad people. They were just drinking the waters of the time. They had...they were privileged. They had never questioned it.

Amanda Palmer [37:25]

Who was the guru?

Elizabeth Lesser [37:26]

[Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan](#), a Sufi master, [Sufism](#) being the mystical dimension of Islam. That was very wonderful that my spiritual foundation is Islamic because when Islam became such a political hot potato in our culture, I had such a different understanding of it than most Americans do, because it's my, it's my home.

Amanda Palmer [37:52]

And where did your guru hail from?

Elizabeth Lesser [37:55]

His father was a great Sufi teacher from [Hyderabad](#) in southern India. Even though, you know, you think of Islam as middle eastern, India has a rich Islamic tradition. His mother was American. She was the niece of the founder of Christian Science, which is [Mary Baker Eddy](#). So, when my teacher's father came to America to teach, he was part of that 1920s American revival that...that Christian Science was part of in [Theosophy](#) and things like that. So, he met her. So, they had these hybrid children of American Christianity and Indian Islam, and they moved to Paris. He was raised in Paris, very highly educated, Sorbonne, Oxford. He fought in World War II.

So, when he came to America, and there were all these hippies wanting to do yoga and meditate, he was very different. Erudite scholar, he spoke all these languages, intellectual, social justice kind of minded guy. So, our spiritual education through him wasn't your typical [Ashrami](#) thing. It was a real, like an infusion of world religious traditions.

Anyway, back to the feminism question. It took me a long time to find my voice and to trust my voice and to separate myself from the forces that were holding me back, many of them my own internalized patriarchy. Like, they know better. I shouldn't speak so loud. This conflict has been in me my whole life, of wanting to be the good girl and knowing that the good girl archetype was going to be the ruination of the world. That if the girls didn't shed that, those in power aren't going to give it up. That's what Beyonce says. You gotta take it. Like, I finally got that. You gotta take it. And when you take it, people aren't going to like you. Okay? What do you want? To be liked? Or do you want to do your true art and your true activism?

(Music Break)

Amanda Palmer [40:30]

When you were 23 and part of this community that was all about seeking higherness, a better world, who were the women around you, and how did they feel about this?

Elizabeth Lesser [40:48]

I came from this background of social activism on my mother's side. She was a closet social activist. not really that closeted, but in the family, she was closeted. You know, she was part of the League of Women Voters, and she marched in Washington and she marched—

Amanda Palmer [41:07]

Closeted how?

Elizabeth Lesser [41:08]

In the family, she could never stand up to my father. So, she talked a good game, but I am really...I think maybe this is where spirituality self-help meets up with social justice and activism. How are you living this, social activists? Are you just complaining about the man, about the guy in the presidency? Or are you...are you gracefully yet fiercely living it in your family?

Amanda Palmer [41:42]

And so...but go back to being 23 and isolated. Why were you isolated? You were living on a commune, practically? How could you be that isolated? Or so close to so many people?

Elizabeth Lesser [41:56]

Well it would be like...it would be like asking women in Saudi, how come you still can't drive? Why don't you all get together and talk about it? There's more women than men. What's your problem? We were drinking this Kool-Aid of a spiritual tradition. And if you go back into every religion, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, the doctrine is, women, you go back there. The men get to worship up here, they make the rules, and they are the teachers.

Amanda Palmer [42:29]

And you make the food.

Elizabeth Lesser [42:30]

And you make the food and you're, oh, but we will worship you. You are Holy Mother. We will worship you, but you have no right to determine really anything here. So, that was still going on, even though we were like 1960s, '70s, '80s, totally supposedly liberated women.

Amanda Palmer [42:50]

Well, so where was the intersection between what you were doing with your guru, with your husband, with Omega? It was the '70s. You were in your, you know, 20s, going into your 30s. That was the height of a new wave of feminism and women's liberation. Did they touch?

Elizabeth Lesser [43:08]

They touched in me, but for those people who were primarily spiritual seekers, they were not touching yet. They were touching maybe in things like goddess, you know, goddesses in every woman, the kind of like finding your internal feminine power, but in terms of confronting the structures of patriarchy, that did not begin to manifest as in the outside world for a while. But if you would like to know what caused the greatest unrest in me, as a wife, and as a leader of an organization, that was it, and it became untenable, and it began to manifest in me as illness in my body.

Amanda Palmer [43:58]

In what way?

Elizabeth Lesser [43:59]

I...first of all, I was a mother of two little kids. So, most mothers are exhausted and depleted who have full time jobs and families. But I began to be exhausted. I had enormous digestive problems. I was like...I felt like I was being eaten alive. It took, it undid my life. It unraveled my life.

Amanda Palmer [44:25]

And what's so amazing about this is that this is happening...this is not happening in Kabul. This is happening in, you know, in lefty liberal America with you being surrounded by all of these spiritual teachers.

Elizabeth Lesser [44:42]

Excuse me, it's happening right now. It's happening down the street. It's happening all over the place. It's happening in the White House. It's...it's...sounds exotic and like, oh, you were in a commune with the...or you were liberal or it's like...but it's still happening. It's happening in our hearts where women even in this generation of “, young women who are so much more sexually embodied and powerful than I ever was at that age are still under the influence of, I should be nice. I should look a certain way. I should be thin. I should be blonde. I should be, uh, quiet.

Amanda Palmer [45:33]

Unthreatening.

Elizabeth Lesser [45:34]

Unthreatening. And if you go into corporate America, it's so...it's so male dominated even within organizations where there's an attempt to bring women into leadership, and by male dominated, I mean, a value system.

Amanda Palmer [45:53]

At the Omega Institute, which is, you know, basically a retreat center in upstate New York, where 300 plus people can sleep and there's a staff and there's people doing all sorts of workshops and teaching all sorts of things, you have specifically taken on women's leadership. You have something there called the Women's Leadership Program. What is it?

Elizabeth Lesser [46:18]

Well, about 15 or so years ago, I thought, I'm going to put a conference together called Women and Power because the marrying of the words women and power was like, ew, whether women, men, everybody, so I thought, okay, it makes me uncomfortable, it makes people uncomfortable. Let's talk about it. So, I invited [Eve Ensler](#), who I had never met, of The Vagina Monologues, Gloria Steinem, Anita...

Amanda Palmer [46:48]

Anita Hill.

Elizabeth Lesser [46:49]

...Anita Hill who to me was like, okay, this is a woman who was forced by her own integrity to speak truth to power. I want to hear what that was like for her. It was explosive. It was incredible. I was like, usually I just do a one off... one, you know women in power. I did that. Yeah. We had to do it the next year. And then the next year. Like, by year three, there were 2000 women in New York City in a ballroom. And all the mothers of the women's movement and young people and actresses and artists.

And after a while, I thought, okay, this is sort of a waste of, of, of intellectual capital just to do a weekend. Let's take some of what we're learning and, and train women to be what we call how to do power differently. It's not just enough to get our asses into leadership roles in a corporation if the entire structures of power are about power over and domination and lack of input from other people. How...how could women be agents of doing power differently?

Amanda Palmer [48:05]

Self-care.

Elizabeth Lesser [48:06]

It's always...it's self-care. It's self-inquiry. What am I blaming out there on men, which is really like my own inability just to say what I want? Be who I want? Own both my power and my kindness, like my softness. How could softness be part of power? So, like, when you asked, so where is it now 15 years later, I get this sort of imposter syndrome. A shroud goes over me like, oh, no, we didn't solve it. We haven't solved it. You know, like, so where we are is, we're in the question. We're in the discomfort. We're in the ironies and the contradictions and the wanting desperately not to be a place that blames men but brings men along.

Amanda Palmer [48:59]

Yeah.

Elizabeth Lesser [49:00]

We're...we're in the mess.

Amanda Palmer [49:01]

It is a fucking mess. I mean the...as a...as a feminist and as a lover of seeking and compassion, the thing that hurts me the most within this movement, this zigzagging, messy progress and evolution is that sometimes it seems like some of the most active voices in feminism are so unkind, and I get shit as a feminist for putting up my hand and saying, like, can't we all just get along and take a deep breath and be compassionate because that is seen as weakness? And I know it's not.

Elizabeth Lesser [49:48]

And I would say that's the internalized patriarchy because...and women have it and men who don't want to have it, have it because that's all we've known.

Amanda Palmer [49:59]

...is that aggression is power. And loudness is power.

Elizabeth Lesser [50:00]

That's all we've known.

Amanda Palmer [50:02]

I feel like, you know, I've gone through so many iterations of self-inquiry knowledge and I still feel like I have not learned when to back off and when to wisely, say less.

Elizabeth Lesser [50:20]

Well, just that you're saying that, though, is an enormous sign that you have learned a lot. And it comes from the pause that you learn in meditation, like what is meditation? It's observing yourself on your meditation cushion for maybe 20 minutes every day. Why? You observe your discomfort, you let...you watch it dissipate, and then you make a decision. That's what it teaches you out in the world. This is an inner dialogue that if you meditate enough, can take all of seven seconds after you've trained yourself like, eh, no, I'll do that later.

Amanda Palmer [51:04]

Well, it's...it is...it is like there is one general muscle, even if it is my ear itches and I want to scratch it, that there's just a general muscle of impulsivity.

Elizabeth Lesser [51:20]

Yes, impulsivity.

Amanda Palmer [51:21]

And if you can learn to just not follow every little instinctive impulse. I mean, that's what Yoga is, too. It's basically impulse control, and in a lot of religious traditions, there's some practice of impulse control. There's some form of, you know...or you call it prayer, but it's still all the same thing. It's stopping and just being without doing and watching that being. And I really...I—

Elizabeth Lesser [51:55]

I just want to interrupt for one second. Sorry. You just...I was going back to our first conversation of, you, please take over the marketing department at Omega, because sometimes I'll read what we write. It's like being without doing, pausing with, and I'm like, oh my god. You know, I used to...for many years I worked for Oprah. I produced a bunch of her programs when she started wanting to take spiritual books, turn them into programs or curriculum. I helped her do it. It was way fun. And I would say things and she'd be like...

Amanda Palmer [52:29]

Write that down.

Elizabeth Lesser [52:30]

Nobody will. No, the opposite. She would say, nobody's going to understand what you're talking about. Like, if you say conscious, my listeners are going to think the opposite of a coma. Like, you can't just say the word, he's very conscious. Like, and so you can't say like, doing and being.

Amanda Palmer [52:47]

You need plain speak.

Elizabeth Lesser [52:48]

Plain, plain speak.

Amanda Palmer [52:49]

Yeah, I mean, I guess I'm saying that because I think you know what 'm talking about.

Elizabeth Lesser [52:54]

I do, but it's such a problem when you're talking about the ineffable, the gloriousness of what it means to train yourself to pause and open your heart and quiet your mind and sit in this awe of being and so...and then you're just like blah, blah, blah.

Amanda Palmer [53:16]

Right. Well, there's certain experiences that are really hard to describe for a reason. It's really hard to describe with words what it feels like to birth a child out of your body. It's really hard to describe what it feels like to drop acid and walk through the woods.

Elizabeth Lesser [53:35]

Have an orgasm.

Amanda Palmer [53:36]

Have an orgasm. But also, what a great challenge. I mean, and you live your life trying to describe what it is that you've figured out.

Elizabeth Lesser [53:46]

Yeah.

Amanda Palmer [53:47]

And spiritual teachers, religious people, people who have fallen off cliffs and had near-death experiences, like, they find it really difficult to put into words, but also like, that's why fucking art! That's why we have art! This is what art is actually supposed to do, and it is why it is not a luxury item of life. It is a necessity to have a couple of people in the tribe whose job it is to try to describe in a book, in a song, in a painting, through a dance, in a sculpture.

Elizabeth Lesser [54:30]

Hum...in a song...art is...art is where it's at. Art is, you know, when I...I—

Amanda Palmer [54:31]

Did you just say, art is where it's at? You are so 70s.

Elizabeth Lesser [54:32]

At...art is where it's at. I am, proudly. I...I...I'm a huge Springsteen fan, and when I...I have never been able to describe to myself or anyone why, when I go to a concert, what his songs do to me, like the church of those concerts, and then I don't know if you saw the...

Amanda Palmer [54:54]

The Broadway show?

Elizabeth Lesser [54:55]

The Broadway show.

Amanda Palmer [54:56]

I did and I talk about his show in my new show.

Elizabeth Lesser [55:00]

Oh. Because when I went and saw that, and he put the scaffolding around what his songs mean and what he was going through when he wrote certain songs, which for me are anthems, and I don't even know why, I was...that was one of the most extraordinary nights of my life watching that show. I just cried through the whole thing.

Amanda Palmer [55:23]

I cried a lot during that show, too. And I had no idea what to expect. I hadn't read any reviews or anything. And I sat there and I watched him weave this story of life, song, music, art, authenticity, and stuff. And then, you know, Caroline went off home and I walked through this...and I was, right at that moment, recording, finishing up the, um, the songs that I was going to record for [There Will Be No Intermission](#) which had no title yet and I knew I was going to do a tour, and I was going try to write the most honest album I had ever written. And I walked around New York City, actually noticing myself sitting in judgment, because I was like, god, he was just so honest. But you know, there were places he went. He talked about his father dying. He talked about his mom's dementia.

But I wonder if Bruce Springsteen would ever talk about the abortion he went through? The miscarriage, the, you know, the reproductive drama of his life. I bet he never would. I bet that's a line he couldn't cross. I bet Bruce Springsteen...I was like would happen to Bruce Springsteen's fanbase if he discussed the...and I just watched my head going, like I bet...da da. And then, I literally stopped in my tracks, because I had not yet written a song about abortion or miscarriage for my record. And I thought, it doesn't fucking matter what Bruce Springsteen did or didn't do or talked about or didn't talk about.

You can. So, you have to. And I remember, I remember standing on like, 38th Street and going like, No, I don't want...I don't want. But I...

Elizabeth Lesser [57:18]

That's such a beautiful story, Amanda.

Amanda Palmer [57:22]

Well, and also the beginning part of that story, in this show, I talk about being in a yoga class with [Baron Baptiste](#) in my mid-20s. And he had this, he had this mantra in his teaching, where you would be about to do something really annoying and difficult, and he would say, if you can, you must. And I always thought that was a very kind of like macho, like West Point, you know, you could sort of imagine some drill sergeant being like, if you can, you must, pussies! But actually, it was very useful to have a voice in my ear when I was like, I don't really want to lift my legs up. That's going to be super uncomfortable. And I don't wanna hold 'em there, to have a little voice saying like, but you can, so you must.

Elizabeth Lesser [58:09]

Uh-huh. I think the question we have to ask ourselves now and I'm saying this about women. Men can say...can find their own way to say it. I'm just saying about women right now is, if you can, you must. That is true. There are parts of what Bruce Springsteen sings about and acts like that bug the hell out of me. He's a dude, and it's always bugged me. But your experience with him, how it moved you to be like, I'm gonna do my authenticity. So, I use, I am inspired by him to be authentic. So, what does it mean to be an authentically empowered woman today? What does it mean? When we can...if we can, what must we do? What must we do? I don't want to just get the power to get the power. I, what we must do is stand with guts for something different, you know, like...

Amanda Palmer [59:17]

Use the power.

Elizabeth Lesser [59:18]

Use the power to do something entirely different. I mean, shit, look, we've pushed out babies. That's powerful. I want to push out a different baby world here.

Amanda Palmer [58:28]

Well, and we've got a guy in head office right now who is only about having power, and not about utilizing the power. And it's such a, I mean, it's such a fascinating paradox right now that in the world of woke and in the, you know, now fourth, fifth sixth wave of feminism, we've got the ultimate bully and the ultimate un-woke dude in office and all I can hope, with the election coming up, all I can hope is that this...he will be the biggest gift America has ever been given because there's something so worth pushing back against.

Elizabeth Lesser [01:00:17]

Absolutely.

Amanda Palmer [01:00:18]

Something so worth gathering around, getting on the same page, putting aside our differences, and just, I mean, just having one gigantic pushback and push out like birth a whole new paradigm because we can all point at that and say, not okay. Anything but that. Anything but that way of being and way of forcing oneself upon the world.

Elizabeth Lesser [01:00:46]

And I honor the people trying to both push against it, and then show a different dream. You know, we gotta do both. We can't be stupid and just think if we talk about something better, it'll work. We got to push against him. But we also got to...

Amanda Palmer [01:01:01]

...create the alternative.

Elizabeth Lesser [01:01:02]

Yeah.

(Music Break)

Amanda Palmer [01:01:05]

That was me in conversation with writer Elizabeth Lesser in August 2019. Elizabeth's new book, *Cassandra Speaks*, is out now, and she urges you to get it from your local indie bookstore, but if you can't, you know where to go. I would also really highly recommend her other books, particularly *Broken Open* and *Marrow*, which was about becoming a bone marrow donor for her sister. This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast, and now it is time to thank everyone who I asked to help me put this monster together.

First of all, thank you so much to Elizabeth Lesser. She has been such an incredible partner in my life and in the leadup to launching this podcast, and I am so excited to do the live follow-up chat with her this coming Friday. She's also just been really holding my hand through the dark as I navigate my new life here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. For anyone who's not actually following that plot at home, I've been marooned, stuck, not really stuck...stuck by choice, not going back to America because I am not insane, here, in Aotearoa, New Zealand since March, and I'm really homesick, but I'm happy to be here. It's complicated. Anyway, Elizabeth, if you're listening, thank you, and I love you so much.

The engineer for this interview was Michael Birnbaum at Applehead Studios in Woodstock, New York.

The theme song that you're listening to right now is a song called "Bottomfeeder" from my 2012 crowdfunded album, *Theatre is Evil*.

I would like to give a shout out to my soul-brother, collaborator, Jherek Bischoff, who arranged and mixed the sort of in betweeny orchestral music that you heard in this podcast. Those are all little snippets from my latest album, *There Will Be No Intermission*, and Jherek used the songs on the album to sort of create the little masterpieces. And you can go support Jherek over on his own Patreon. He's a really prolific musician, and his stuff is just wonderful.

For all of the music that you heard in this episode, you can go to the new and improved amandapalmer.net/podcast.

Many, many thanks to my podcast assistant, social media helper, cowriter, all around wonderful person, and additional engineer, Xanthea O'Connor, who is literally holding the mike as we speak.

I want to thank all of my team in New York and Sydney and London. We are worldwide. Team AFP, Michael, Hayley, Jordan, and Alex, thank you so much for helping with this.

More special thanks to Nick Rizzuto, Brittney Bomberger, Allie Cohen, and Braxton Carter.

And last, but not least, this whole thing would not be possible without my patrons, all 15,000 of you. Patronage means that I can release this podcast with no ads, no sponsors, and no censorship. We actually really are free media. I can say whatever I want here. So, special thanks are due to my high-tier patrons, Bernhard Rebok, Simon Oliver, Saint Alexander, Birdy Black, Ruth Ann Harnisch, and Leela Cosgrove. Thank you, guys, so much.

Please go to Patreon, become a member, come to the Crowdcast that we're going to hold after every single podcast, and we're going to do a live follow-up chat. You can ask questions. You can see me continue on this conversation in the real world, given that a lot of these podcasts were recorded, oh, like, a year a half ago, and my Patreon is full of all sorts of extra stuff, pictures and notes and so much more. So, please go find me there.

Signing off, I am Amanda Fucking Palmer. Keep on asking everything.