

# The Art of Asking Everything

## Wayne Muller: A Chat With My Therapist

**Amanda Palmer 00:34**

This is The Art of Asking Everything, I'm Amanda Fucking Palmer.

It is January 17th, 2021, as I sit down here in Aotearoa New Zealand to record this intro to a conversation that took place in upstate New York in July 2019, like a world and a lifetime and a pandemic ago.

And I wanted to note here that I have actually have been equivocating since I recorded this, whether or not I would highlight the fact that the guest is my therapist, or would I vaguely mention it, but mostly kind of keep it in the background. And then I realized as I just sat down to make the intro for this, that I actually still feel this strange stigma about saying that I have a therapist. I think partly because I grew up in an immediate community culture that considered therapists okay, but slightly... "woo", and also the flip side of feeling like saying that you have a therapist is this thing that privileged metro New Yorkers do, and between those two things, I've always been pretty private in public about the fact that I have a therapist.

But, and let me just say it, I fucking love therapy. And always have. My best friend and mentor growing up was a therapist, and I have seen therapy, all kinds of therapy, transform, and save, and I'm not being hyperbolic there, save the lives of dozens, hundreds of people in my life. So why am I, at age 44, considering sort of lying about it? I don't know. That's probably worth its own podcast episode.

But part of this decision to just go, oh yeah, this is a conversation with my therapist, was also sort of inspired by [my episode that came out about a month ago, with Tim Ferriss](#), and listening to [his recent podcast, which was like a heart-pour about trauma, that he did with Debbie Millman](#), another podcaster, and just how totally open and shame-free the two of them were about talking about therapy as this normal thing you do, as a human being.

So, all that being said, let me tell you a story.

Many years ago, before I had a child, but after I'd gotten married, I was at one of those TED-like conferences, where musicians, and climate scientists, and doctors, and people who design space-age prosthetic limbs, all get together, and talk about things, and do workshops, and listen to each other speak. And there was a free afternoon at this place, where you could either go on

a hike up a cliff, or learn archery, and all these activities on offer. And one of them was horse whispering. And I did not know what that meant. I thought, possibly, you actually - this is how little I knew - I thought maybe you actually whispered to a horse. Or, because I threw it in that pile of really out there things that people do, maybe horse even whispers to you, psychically, in some reiki way, if you got close to it enough. I just didn't know anything! I didn't know what it was!

And because I had been listening for a couple of days to top scientists and world-changing people talking about risk assessment and fear, I was like, okay! I will do this unknown, strange thing.

And that is how I found myself, one afternoon, many years ago, weeping uncontrollably in a horse paddock, because I finally became deeply aware of some of the dark working of my own mind, in a way that didn't just scare the shit out of me, but actually made me deeply sad.

And that is how I met Wayne Muller. He was dude with the horse.

So as I learned, horse whispering is actually basically just therapy with a horse as a kind of tool, and a prop. But it's just therapy.

And so I met Wayne, and I told him I'd written a book, and he said "Oh, I've written a couple of books," and we traded books, and between that experience, grieving the state of my mind and whole life in the horse paddock, and the fact that his books, when I read them, were really, incredibly good, I was sold. And since then, he's been my therapist, and he's also become a true friend, to me, and to my family, and to many other people in my life that he's taken on, and helped out, in some of their darkest hours of need, and he is my emergency phone call. And in a way, he sort of picked up where Anthony, my old mentor, left off, and I don't find it a coincidence that Wayne walked into my life right around the time Anthony walked out.

And going on two years ago, when I decided to lead a retreat in the woods of upstate New York on a lake for about 50 of my patrons, Wayne was the other leader I chose, alongside Leslie Salmon Jones, the yoga teacher and healer who [I also had a guest on this podcast a few episodes ago](#). And these guys were a dream team, and there's sort of a meme that came out of this retreat, that my patrons still refer to, cos we sometimes catch up on Zoom calls, and we called it the Wayne Sigh. Because we were all just in love with the sound of Wayne's giant sigh that would open up every gathering. And it's a good one. Trademark 2021, the Deep Wayne Sigh.

So before I bring him on, here's a little bio: Wayne Muller is a minister, therapist, and leadership mentor. He serves as a consultant with community, educational, and healthcare organizations. His books include [A Life of Being, Having, and Doing Enough](#), [Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight in our Busy Lives](#), and an earlier book, which is very beautiful, it's called [Legacy of](#)

[the Heart: The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood](#). Think about that for a second. The spiritual advantages of a painful childhood! You might wanna read that one.

He's currently at work on a new book about addiction that I cannot wait to read. Title forthcoming.

But meanwhile, here we go, here's the very candid, very open, beautiful conversation we had with each other way back in July 2019. We recorded it near my house in upstate New York, in Woodstock, just a few days after that retreat I told you about, and we talked about everything under the sun, as usual, but some of the highlights were about the lies we tell each other, and ourselves, how hard it is to say no, which is becoming a real theme in this podcast, and how "no" is a like a deer fence around your metaphorical garden, and a beautiful detour also into how we all have the power to console someone who is frightened, or lonely, which, in 2021, with a pandemic now still raging across the world, it feels like a very important message.

Please welcome my therapist, Wayne Muller.

MUSIC - You'd Think I'd Shot Their Children

**Wayne 09:22**

*(Sighs)* Amanda.

**Amanda 09:24**

*(Squeals)* It's so good! And then I go, Wayne!

**Wayne 09:30**

Exactly. We find one another in that frequency.

**Amanda 09:35**

So I've talked to you on the phone a lot in the last three years, because all cards on the table, you have been my therapist, and my marriage's therapist. My marriage itself has needed a therapist, and you have helped me, and my husband, and my family, and at this point, a handful of my friends, and fans, and community, because I have begun a system of Wayne referrals far and wide. Wayne is currently staying at our house, we're in Woodstock, and we're recording in downtown Woodstock.

So I sent you guys [a screenshot of a tweet](#), and the writer of the tweet is @kramski, and the tweet has been liked 263,000 times, and retweeted almost 100,000. It says, "I love how being an adult is just saying "But after this week, things will slow down a bit again" to yourself until you die."

What can you tell us about that tweet, and the fact that everyone in the universe feels some kind of a resonance with it?

**Wayne 10:48**

Well, I absolutely loved receiving that last night, when I got into my room, because you sent it to me, and I think Neil as well. And there are several stories, actually, in that brief sentence fragment. One of the stories is that there is a point at which our responsibilities that are feeling oppressive, or hard to deal with, or impossible to finish, will, at some point, once we do things correctly, vanish, be done, no longer be an issue, and then the space after that will be the way the white space looks on our calendar when we look far into the future, empty space, able to handle anything beautiful that comes our way. That's one fiction, that of course isn't true, because the moment we get there, many other barnacles have accumulated on the whole of our lives.

**Amanda 11:53**

Oh, that's good.

**Wayne 11:57**

And they really are like barnacles, in that, they're not that big, it's not that... And so, it's very easy to say yes to, because it'll just take me 5 minutes, 10 minutes, which of course is another lie, because nothing really takes 5 minutes, or 10 minutes, and so we underestimate what will be required, we overestimate our capacity, and so we are dishonest with ourselves about what we're really capable of. We also over-emphasise the value of how important whatever it is on our list is to the wellbeing of either ourselves or our loved ones, the world, whereas if we step back from time to time, and look at the grander things in our lives, we see where things belong, in terms of what really needs our heart's best, most pure, passionate attention. And if everything gets the same kind of attention, then we will start to feel brittle, and thin, and weary, and used up.

**Amanda 13:03**

Why do you think we overestimate? What is that about? Why are we like that? I mean, we could be any way under the sun, why are we like that instead of some other way?

**Wayne 13:20**

We are astonishingly slow learners, as a species. I mean, look at evolution. Okay, it took us a million years to figure this out, and then we took another million years to figure this out.

**Amanda 13:35**

Why are we so dumb?!

**Wayne 13:39**

There was a time in our lives, when we were young, when we didn't have to think about how long things took, because, in theory, we had parents, and people around us who were bigger than us, who figured that kind of stuff out, so there was a lot of magic in our world.

**Amanda 13:56**

Our job was just to play.

**Wayne 13:57**

Right, exactly. And they gave us the slots, and we just lived in them, and so we didn't have a lot of experience in the planning, the figuring, the deciding, the choosing, so that is really an adult skill, which is another thing that makes that tweet so elegant, is because it really is an adult skill. Children don't learn that skill until they become adults.

**Amanda 14:24**

Right, or learn the fine art of fucking up that skill.

**Wayne 14:27**

Right, more often than not. We don't learn by success anywhere near as effectively as we learn from sheer, unadulterated failure.

We also don't want it to be true, which again is a magical way of thinking. The child part of us wants it to be able to be easy, so that we can then be set free. And in truth, it's also taking longer to do things, and that's actually true in real life for almost everybody. It's not just a psychological issue; the minimum wage being where it is for ten years now means that people have to work more than 40 hours in order to afford an apartment in the United States, if they work for minimum wage. So work takes longer than it used to. That's just economics and physics combining. If we haven't planned for that, and we think we can still work 40 hours, that extra 20 hours feels like an invasion, rather than how things really are.

Seeing things as they are is one of the hardest things for human beings to do.

**Amanda 15:41**

Something that came up a few months ago, I was sitting with a friend in a cafe, and she was telling me that she's found a really useful name for a phenomenon that she sees happening with certain people, and with certain friends, which is the disease of equal value, and that the emotional time, and attention, and degree of drama and panic, that accompanies 'I lost my cell phone' is the same amount of drama, panic, attention, tragedy, that accompanies 'I just found out my sister has cancer.'

**Wayne 16:17**

Or 'I lost my child at the mall.'

**Amanda 16:20**

And at the same time, if you believe the zen masters of old, there is kind of this invitation to equal value, that's sort of liberating. I'll never forget something I read, I read it in my 20s, and it was a book by Thích Nhất Hạnh, and he's talking about having a conversation with one of his friends, and how that friend of his realised that he was dividing his time up between getting his

time to himself and being able to work, and that was good, and then the time that he needed to spend taking care of his child, and that time was just kind of annoying. And like, he loved his child, and he loved doing it, but he couldn't wait to get back to his time. And then one day, he realised that if he just changed his perspective, and called the time that he was having with his child 'his time', he gets to always be having his fucking time, whether he was working on his book, playing with his kid, doing the dishes, because those are the dishes that happened to have accumulated, and that's his time to do the dishes. And that strikes me as a form of enlightenment, that even when you're walking the dog, or doing the dishes, or taking a shit, or doing your taxes, if you can have that kind of equal value, and not look at all of life as a struggle, and then maybe you'll get that 5 days of vacation with the maitai in your hand, then you can actually enjoy your entire life.

But, there has to be some kind of distinction between those two concepts. So what is it?

### **Wayne 17:59**

What we bump into is our humanity, and you know what the Buddhists speak about has some very real truth deeply embedded in it, clearly. Run through the oddness of being human, it has to go through some mazes in order to find its way into our lives. I remember having a similar epiphany when I was thinking about, how am I gonna carve out X amount of time for quiet, stillness, reflection, whatever? And the concept of figure ground, which a lot of artists will know, and some psychologists in the Jungian sphere, or anyone who understands archetypes, figure ground essentially means if you see a photo, or an image of a tree, and a house, and then there's mountains and sky in the background, the figure is the house and the tree, and the ground is the mountains and the sky, and the earth around. My ground was being busy, getting a lot of things done. The figure that I was seeking was time for stillness, quiet, and reflection. And I said, well, what if I flipped that, and I made my ground being in stillness, quiet, and reflection, and I would only leave that place for very specific figures that required my attention, and then come back to my ground.

And so, I start with stillness, and the only thing that pulls me out of that are things that I choose to participate in.

### **Amanda 19:44**

So, I can feel the anxiety, and the panic, rising in anyone listening to this the world over, going, that sounds fucking fantastic, and completely unrealistic. Because that sounds fucking great, WAYne, but how can you tell me to live a life of stillness and quietude when there's three screaming children and the guy has run out and I can't pay my bills? And what do you say to that person?

### **Wayne 20:11**

I'm painfully aware of the economic and social and political realities of our age, and that it's not so much making a big change in how we live, as it is a big change in how we think, feel, internally approach, what we've been given in life right now. For example, you and I just co-led a

retreat at Omega, and we started as a practice to begin with some kind of mindfulness sit, for maybe five minutes, ten at the very most. And a mindfulness practice is, in essence, a way to focus one's attention, so that rather than living by accident, we live a little bit more on purpose.

Mindfulness is, essentially, paying attention. By learning how to pay attention to how our breath feels, if we're feeling anxious, if we're feeling tired, if we're feeling excited, whatever it is, we're often asleep to those feelings, because we're so focused on the next thing that needs to be done.

What I noticed most potently was when we went around the circle and asked people, what would they take from this retreat? At least fully a third of the people there said, I'm going to begin a mindfulness practice, based on five minutes. That much, they could feel, would shift the way that they stepped into the river of their life that day. People can feel the difference between beginning a day with five minutes of time where they just settled in to feeling their incarnation, this brief period of being alive, in a deeper root system, and that shifted how they approached whatever they were going to face, so powerfully that that was the one thing they wanted to change when they got home.

MUSIC BREAK - You Know The Statistics

**Amanda 22:39**

The metaphor possibly creates a misunderstanding. Because when you picture in your mind a framed painting, with a landscape, and a figure of a house and a tree, it leads you to believe what I actually think creates a general disconnect between your average layperson who gives no shits about meditation and yoga, and thinks that it is for people who have a lot of time to give to it. Because if we're imagining that pie chart, the same panic and the anxiety that came up in me, on behalf of all the people who might have been feeling it, is you need all of this expertise, and all of this time, that I clearly don't have.

But what you're actually saying is, it's more, if you are deciding to make the ground a baseline of stillness, it doesn't mean you need to permanently live there. It's almost a better metaphor to say like, this is a precious blue dye that I'm going to stick in the giant gallon of white paint in my life with which I am going to paint, but I know that underneath everything, whether it is catastrophe, sickness, abuse, stress, anxiety, drama, there's a baseline under everything of stillness. Not that like, I'm gonna do stillness for seven hours a day, and then the rest of it I/m ust gonna be one of those hypervigilant schedulers, because I'm gonna know what to do, but actually, just that everything is ground, or everything is figure, and what it is is not coming from a place of anxiety and panic, and constant catching up, but coming from a place of, at any minute I can be unshakeable because I know how to take a deep breath and not get caught up in the panic of the moment.

**Wayne 24:40**

Some substantial percentage of people listening to this podcast at any time will be wrestling with some version of where should I be living, in one way or another. Maybe they need to move, maybe some relationship has been created, or is coming apart, or a job, it doesn't matter. But wherever they've been living, they need to find a place to live, and move. In fact, once they get there, they may only spend six hours a day in that place, and go off very early in the morning and run around and do work and do all kinds of things, and walk in the door and collapse on their bed, in their clothing, and six hours later, jump up, shower, change, and off they are again, but they call that home.

The question for me is, can we make that initially five minute experience home? Even if we only spend a little bit of time there, just like that apartment or house, or wherever, where we only spend six hours sleeping, but we still call it home.

Part of it is claiming as home, not the running around, but the stillness from which we come, and to which we return. It's a fundamental archetypal question about home, which is, for many, many people, in a very deep way, many people are confused about that word and its meaning in their life, and often don't always feel at home in the place where they've put that tack on the map. So part of it is making it internally, so that the world has very little to say, or can't take away your home, whereas it can in the world.

### **Amanda 26:30**

Neil and I have been in a 'what is home?' struggle, and the proportions are just bizarre, because we travel constantly, so whatever we're calling home isn't even just the place that we sleep, it's the place that we'll come back to every six months and spend some time unpacking and doing our laundry again before we go out and live in London for four months, or live in Australia for three months, and go on tour, and live in tour buses, and taking turns taking care of our child. I really struggled with our current, let's call it sleeping house. I've struggled with our current sleeping house, but I also was dealing with my own internal struggle in my relationship with Neil, reorienting myself as a parent, just feeling homeless on every kind of level.

I see it with Neil too in his career, but I certainly feel it as I tour. There is a kind of a home base for me, emotionally, doing a show, and just being with my community. And when I have felt upended and disoriented and homeless in my little domestic sphere, I can feel very relaxed and at home when I tour, and I'm with a group of semi-strangers, the same way I am sure you have felt that with different groups of people, because you're sort of a group leader, and a workshop leader.

One of the reasons I wanted to do this retreat last week, and get these 60 people together, and I think I even mentioned it a few times in the course of the retreat, is like, this is where we live right now. With each other. I'm used to this. I've changed homes maybe 600 times in the course of my adult life. I'm good at it, and I also really know what I need. And what I really need is to just feel connected to the people who are in the room right now, and I can do it at the drop of a hat, cos I've had to learn how to do that.



One of the things you've really helped me with, just to have someone to work through all of this internal stuff, because also I used to have Anthony on the phone all the time, he wasn't my "therapist", but he was a therapist, and he raised me. You, in a way, almost took his place as a kind of homing mechanism. Even just to have someone to talk to, to remind me what I'm struggling with, what's going on, what is home, why does this feel so disorienting, what am I doing? And I can say right now, when I shifted my internal feeling within myself, within my relationship with Neil, around where I was, my feeling in my own house transformed. Because I went, oh, right, none of this fucking matters. I could be anywhere. I could be on tour, I could be in the Congo, I could be in Iceland. I was really trying to rely on the correct Tetris combination of domestic certitude, rightness, right decision, to make me happy, and that was incorrect. It wouldn't have worked.

### **Wayne 29:57**

When you call me from a place of whirling, or flailing, or unknowing, that feels in that moment bigger than you, or frightening, or painful, or really 99 times out of 100 what I will be doing is mirroring back to you some way of helping you remember who you are, where you live, where your gifts and where your wholeness is, because me, in Santa Fe, as much as I would love to, can't grant you the peace, the ease, the relief from those things, that I would love to, but you do when you remember the spaciousness of your container.

There's a Tibetan story about if you take a tablespoon of salt and stir it into a glass of water and drink it, it tastes terrible. If you take that same tablespoon of salt and stir it into an enormous clear blue mountain lake, and then you taste the water, it tastes just as sweet. The salt isn't the problem, how spacious the container is is really what creates the suffering. And when we speak, I can feel you remembering how much you can create a space large enough to hold even this, and still be alright. And that's not in service of holding more and more, that's not the point. The point is to be able to remember who you are.

And when we choose a home for ourselves, the world right now is a very difficult place for almost everybody. The economic pressures are statistically so jagged and heart-shredding for people, it's not really being talked about, people have to work harder just to keep up. Finding a place of peace, a time of quiet, is almost impossible. But if there are ways, and if we have one another's back, and if we know one another well enough, what we need really more than anything, are communities of people who know one another, love one another, have one another's back, so that we can remind one another who we really are, how strong, how beautiful. We need to resurrect our magnificence with one another.

### **Amanda 32:36**

Goddamn, Wayne! That was beautiful!

I just don't know a single person who isn't struggling to figure out how to spend their time and attention. What can help?

**Wayne 32:54**

If we tend to a few questions well, it will invariably be of use. It won't necessarily make everything perfect, or solve every problem, but they will be of use. The first is, what is our first fidelity? What is that thing to which, in the core of our being, from the top of our leaves to the bottom of our root structure, what's our first fidelity? And then based on that first fidelity, what are the few things that are in our constitution, our bill of rights, our ten commandments, our four noble truths, whatever, to which we go back when we have many things to decide about? Well, we go back, as we theoretically do, to the constitution of the Supreme Court or whatever you decide, these are the most important. And many people don't, and it's not like we have to figure them out, it's more about listening, because they live inside of us, they're there. It does take some time and attention.

What are the things which will always get my priority, after which, if I have time, and do them well, everything else then has to get a no? And it becomes really hard to say no, because at a certain point in our lives, as we pick up this egg and that egg, no matter how big our hands, or how small the eggs, at a certain point, we can only hold a certain amount of eggs, and if we don't put one down before we take up another, there will be an uncooked omelette on the floor. And so, the choice that we have to make, is what gets our first priority, and after a while, all the things being asked of us are good things, and there's no good reason to say no to a good thing.

**Amanda 34:53**

So can you take me back, just to take it a little bit out of the abstract, first fidelity, describe a life where you can actually concretise this concept?

**Wayne 35:05**

I have a friend who's a rabbi, who's very good at, he loves teaching, he loves being with small groups of people, he loves being able to have the time to do it well. If something's going to get in the way of that, he says, I'd love to, but I'm committed to this group of people. So he's very clear about his fidelities. And then everything else that doesn't fit that gets an absolutely compassionate no, filled with love and kindness, but it's still a no.

A no is like a deer fence around a garden. If you don't put a deer fence around a garden, you don't get any food at the end of the season. A deer fence is not an act of violence, it's an act of allowing life to happen. If we can't say no, even to good things that aren't in our first fidelity, nothing in our first fidelity will flourish.

**Amanda 36:02**

What if we can't discern or distinguish what is or isn't going to serve that fidelity, because we just don't know?

**Wayne 36:12**

That's an excellent question, and again, it really comes back to trial and error, mostly error, and hopefully, if we really attend mindfully to looking in our errors, and they tend to fall in certain boxes, then that's a place of learning, and we can help one another.

Also, I get stuck here. Do I know someone else who can take these things on because they like to? And that's one of the virtues of community, and having one another's back. So I know it will be tended, so I don't feel so bad, but I can't do it honestly. I can offer dishonest kindness, I can offer counterfeit compassion.

**Amanda 36:54**

The problems a lot of people have, they don't know how to answer that question. How would you advise someone even begin answering that question?

**Wayne 37:04**

There are a couple of questions, practices, for people to just sort of hold, and turn over in their hand, heart, and day, that I offer to people. One is to pay attention to what captures your curiosity as you move through the world. Because your curiosity is spontaneous, it's not something you think about. If you feel your curiosity being grabbed by something, keep a journal notebook handy for a month, and watch, what are the things that have captured my curiosity? Don't think about them, don't explain them, don't write stories about them, just make a little note, trusting that the organism is sound, and we are responding into some sympathetic vibration in the world.

The second is, what do we really love? And there's a chapter in my book on enough about doing the next right thing. That's really the only thing we ever do, is the next right thing, and then after that we do the next right thing, and then we die.

**Amanda 38:11**

Woohoo, we're back to our tweet again!

**Wayne 38:13**

A different version of that tweet, hopefully a better, more hopeful version, but we really just do the next right thing, and someone rightly asked, how do you know what the next right thing is? And what it feels like to me is the discerning we need to do is, do you love it, or can you handle it? And if you love it, then that puts it in one category. If you can handle it, that immediately sends it way down the priority list, because we can handle all kinds of things, but we don't have a tremendous amount of extra time in this life to waste on things we can just handle, that other people might love to do. And so, being honest with ourselves, we can talk ourselves into thinking we like certain things, so it requires a rigorous honesty between us and us, which is where, again, some practice of being quiet enough, even for five minutes, resentments, difficulties, things we wanna not have in our lives, will bubble up very quickly, and we'll get that information if there are things we're holding that we really don't wanna be holding.

**Amanda 39:28**

And if we take it back to the Thích Nhất Hạnh story about his friend, that's almost exactly what it sounds like, is he's saying, I can handle spending time with my kid, it's fine, I got it, but I can't wait to get back to my life, where I get to do what I want. And in that sense, that was sort of the script that he was running on, but he also had the ability to flip the script, which I've seen many people in my life do, when they stumble into parenthood accidentally, cos it happens, cos egg met sperm, and oh shit, this was not something that I really had on my list of things to do to love.

**Wayne 40:05**

I have heard of these stories.

**Amanda 40:08**

But, those people, I've seen people move from, 'oh my god, can I handle this? Okay, I think I can handle this', to 'I love this'. You're allowed. And I wonder, that journey from, 'oh my god, can I handle this?', to 'I think I can handle this', to 'I have this down, to I actually love this', this is where my curiosity is drawn. What's the difference between that person, and the person who lives in a state of, 'it happened to me, I'm not happy about it, but I can handle it,' and they just stay there until they die. Because I've met those people. I've met them at 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, deathbed, going, 'I fucking handled it,' and I'm like ah, but you never loved it, did you? You never got past 'I can handle it.'

Because, again, getting back to the figure ground, there's so much we don't have control over. We don't have control over when people get ill, and we're called to the bedside, to the hospital, to the cemetery, to the chemo ward. We don't get to pick so many things. And I sort of write a song about this on the last album, this is sort of what [Death Thing](#) grapples with, which is like, are there spaces where it's better to say 'I can handle this' than 'I love this', ie getting the call saying it's time to come to the emergency room, something horrific has happened to your child. I don't wanna love that. I wanna handle that. So that's all really interesting to me.

But what you were saying, the answer was coming from a question about how do we find the core fidelity? If you're using the garden metaphor, what are you trying to grow, so that you know what that fence is made out of, and comprised of what, no I can't, I don't have time, I can't take that on.

And the equal value thing is really interesting, and I actually, as someone who studies the internet, and has been, I'll plonk my cred down on the table, a fellow at the Berkman Center at Harvard, and really has thought deeply, and discussed deeply, and also been in the trenches of the internet that surrounds us, and the smartphones that surround us, and the style, the lifestyle that we've all kind of stumbled into in the last 10, 15 years, the equal value problem has a lot to do with the design flaw of our environment. Because emails and texts are just coming in in a list.

And I mentioned something, Neil and I were having some disagreement about a random house guest popping by, and these sorts of things fall right into the equal value of, well, if it just landed in your inbox right now, and you happened to be staring at it, and you know you can say yes, and why not, that's really different from making a deliberate decision three days ago, three weeks ago, or three months ago, to say we'd really like to spend a weekend with these particular people, around this kind of company, with a bunch of strangers. But it can be so tempting to just do what's right in front of us, because it's like this whack-a-mole. It's just there, and it's really satisfying to just be like, I can do this, because it's right here, and why not say yes!

#### **Wayne 43:58**

And if it's three hours since we checked our email, then both the email about our friend telling us that they've just got a cancer diagnosis, which is right next to the Nigerian business man, have both already scrolled past the bottom, which means if you don't go look for it, you won't get either one. You won't get all that money from Nigeria, to help your friend with cancer!

#### **Amanda 44:26**

And I don't wanna blame technology, but also, having looked at the science, cos the science is in, and the dopamine hits don't lie, and we really do get excited by an unread email, or an unread text. There's a little chemical thing happening to us, going, ooh!

I love this idea, I saw a great TED talk a few years ago that just reminded us that our ancestors, way back in the day, were driven by only two things ever: threat, or opportunity. That's it. You could divide everything, and every decision, into is there someone chasing me, or am I chasing something that I might eat tonight? That's it.

And I think of our ancestors when I look at my phone, and I go, ooh there's some unread texts. And I go, really, I'm just back in the Savannah in the world of threat or opportunity, because this news is either gonna be exciting news, pleasurable news, opportunity news, something fantastic, or wants to be my friend. Or something bad has happened, and my sense of ego is inflated because I am being informed, and I need to deal with it, and I need to go handle it.

And yet, these things are just coming at us with no attached information as to the level of their importance in regards to our life's fidelity. Stick a fucking bw on that and print it. Because that's how we're living right now. We're just living at the end of a conveyor belt of constant emails, texts, information, news feed, Facebook, Instagram, and there's so much coming at us, that our equal value machine, and I see it with me, I see it with Neil, I see it with all of my friends who suffer under the pile of admin, family, domestic, relationship, sex life, friends... It's so overwhelming, I might as well just do the thing that's in front of my face, cos I have to do fucking something, and this is right here, so I'll just do it. And nobody seems to have an organisational grace figured out. Everyone I see is just kind of flailing.

#### **Wayne 47:11**

Right. Which is why language, and questions, and how we name things, which can sound so archaic and too large, but really, the nobility of the human contribution to the world has been so diminished and devalued over the years, where people are now seen as more like appliances than as sentient beings. [Martin Buber's](#) book on 'I, thou' relationships as opposed to 'I, it' relationships, he was trying to understand how people could put other human beings into ovens, and well, the way you do that is other people become things. It's not an 'I, thou' relationship, it's an 'I, it' relationship, they become other than ourselves.

And the world is in the process of devaluing what human beings bring to the table, as being beautiful, magical, exquisite, inconceivably elegant. And you think about the libraries of Alexandria, or you think about the floating city in the middle of a lake that the Spanish found when they came to Tenochtitlan, which is now Mexico City. It was the most beautiful architecturally advanced thing they'd ever seen before. This is what human beings could do 1,000 or 2,000 years ago. They were so taken by it, they forgot that they were there to kill everybody, until they got a fax from the head office, and said, well have you killed everybody yet? Oh right, right, yeah!

**Amanda 49:03**

Peace through distraction.

**Wayne 49:04**

We forgot, sorry! Yeah, we'll get right on that. But that's sort of where we are now. It's like, we've gone a little bit to sleep, remembering when you think about... and it doesn't matter, but all the painters, the artists, the musicians, the dancers, the creators, the architects, the people who've imagined, dreamed amazing, beautiful things, this is in us. And we end up diminishing the range in which we operate, if we don't take a little bit of time to claim the nobility of the gift of a brief human incarnation, to offer our gift to the family of the Earth, and people.

And I started to think about this when I was the AIDS chaplain in Santa Fe, back in the mid-80s at the height of the AIDS crisis, where we didn't even have a diagnosis, let alone a treatment, and all we could really bring was our presence, because there was nothing medically we could do to help people. And the amount of care and compassion and empathy that came from all sectors of the community to sit at the bedside of essentially a mystery that was taking young people, many of whom were moving to Santa Fe from LA, San Francisco, New York at the time, which is why [there's a song in Rent](#) about people moving to Santa Fe, because they were. But we didn't have anything to offer except something beautiful in our humanity that we really don't give much credence to, and just being good company with someone who's frightened, or lonely.

You don't need degrees in psychology, you don't have to have all the right technologies, you don't have to have seen all the right TED talks to know what to do. There are ways that wisdom blows through us like wind through a flute, we become a kind of music that soothes those we love to the best of our ability. We forget how beautiful are the things that we bring to one another when we're reduced to the metrics of our output. And if we start thinking in those terms,

it's interesting to me that shelves that used to be full of books on self-help are now full of books on productivity. The productivity is a horrible metric for the measure of human life.

MUSIC BREAK

**Amanda 52:06**

You've been around long enough to see the self-help new age... I mean, I was born in 1976, I'm 43, so I remember the moment in the 80s, early 80s, where all of a sudden there was just this crystal, new age, self-help, dancing with each other. Now, I was a child, I wasn't an adult, but in the way that we now have an interesting perspective on "the boomers", and everyone can theorise, well this happened, and so this happened, and so this happened, what do you have to say about, or what did you see grow out of, flourish out of, or completely fail, from that era of 70s, 80s self-help... Did they work? Were people helped? Or was it sort of junk food, cotton candy for most people, and then they just got back to the enslavement to a system that is 'it-ing' them? 'IT-ing' them.

**Wayne 53:24**

I think it speaks exactly to what we're talking about, because for me, what was important was the assumption underlying the reason why those books were written, and many of those assumptions ultimately landed in some country that had, at its root, you are broken and need to be fixed. And I have a sort of visceral...

**Amanda 53:50**

You're talking about America here.

**Wayne 53:52**

Yeah. And I have a visceral theological opposition to that. Thomas Merton talked about people having a hidden wholeness, and as a therapist, as a minister, I've always tried to make an alliance with that hidden wholeness in people. And those books were, if you read this book, I will help you get fixed. When I work with people, I spend more time arguing with them, they say they're broken, I say they're not, it's like the opposite conversation. And trying to convince people that they're not broken is the hardest work I do.

**Amanda 54:33**

Not all of those books were buying into that system, though. I mean, Ram Dass, Be Here Now wasn't buying into that system.

Do you think people, this culture, has a better relationship with, a worse relationship with, even just the concept of finding a way to the door handle to get out of the darkened closet and into the light?

**Wayne 54:58**

Well, it's interesting because in that time, as you mentioned, my first book, because I spent an hour on the Oprah Winfrey show, that sort of catapulted me onto the bestseller list, but that book was on the spiritual advantages of a painful childhood, and I was intentionally...

**Amanda 55:22**

And that's Legacy of the Heart?

**Wayne 55:23**

Yeah, Legacy of the Heart, and the subtitle was The Spiritual Advantages of a Painful Childhood. I was intentionally swimming upstream against the presumptions that whatever happened to people in whose company I was sitting, who as children grew up with alcoholics, abusive parents, sexual abuse, poverty, war, oppression, loss of every imaginable and unimaginable kind, were then necessarily broken, defective, in need of being fixed. I was saying well, that's not necessarily true. It was really not to take anything away from the anguish, or the suffering, and you really had to develop your intuition to get a quiet way of knowing what was really happening around you, and so that's something you've developed, you had to become more porous to let in more information, so that you knew the next right thing to do. You had to learn how to become still, because when the shooting started, then you wouldn't be the more visible target, or quiet and go inside, and find a place of sanctuary. This is monastic training 101 at a very early age.

And so, that doesn't cancel out soul-crushing feeling of being abandoned as a child with no parents in a family that looks like it has parents. But it also doesn't mean then, that you have to spend the rest of your life getting fixed. You may still be whole, there may be part of you that can't be broken. What if that thing that allows grass to push up through concrete lives in you as well? And this is what all spiritual traditions point to, is soul, spirit, true nature, whatever. What if that can't be taken from you, and you still have it? How, then, would you like to claim what you love, what captures your curiosity, what sets you on fire?

When I watch you, I know that when you're curious and excited about something, that's something you're passionate about, that's something you will give your heart's energy and attention to, and I've also seen you invoke skillsets to get through things that have to be gotten through, which is also part of life, but you know the difference. You can feel the difference.

**Amanda 58:02**

Sometimes. Most times.

**Wayne 58:04**

Yeah, sometimes. And sometimes it's in retrospect. But over time, hopefully, what our life is about it refining, and refining, and getting closer and closer, and having more and more of those moments where we feel whole, not broken, when we're following what we love, and not just what we can handle. When we're claiming those, having to say no to beautiful things, deer are lovely creatures, but when they're in the garden, the garden disappears.



**Amanda 58:33**

You're working on a new book right now. It's a book on addiction. Can you talk about the book, and just tell us about it?

**Wayne 58:40**

So many people have written about addiction, and I'm writing it because I was asked to write it, and at the same time, the only way I can really feel good about writing it is to put it in a larger context that we all share, and that is that there's a tremendous amount of despair in our, I can say at least American culture, right now, because a lot of truth isn't being told about how hard life is, how hard people have to work just to make it, how many people are living paycheque to paycheque, how many people have to make choices between am I gonna get healthcare for my child or am I gonna pay my rent? Those are real, those aren't just a few people, that's actually a majority of Americans have that conundrum as a truth in their life. So it's not unusual, then, that people are becoming addicted to alleviating pain. That's the drug with which we're having the most difficulties.

**Amanda 59:53**

You mean pain-alleviating drugs? Cos right now we're dealing with an opioid crisis.

**Wayne 59:57**

The opioid crisis.

**Amanda 60:00**

Yeah, we don't have a country that's addicted to LSD and third eye mind squeegeeing psychedelic acid trips.

**Wayne 60:10**

We do have a country that's addicted to alcohol, but alcohol can be taxed in such a way that they keep it available for as many people as they possibly can, so there are addictions that are appropriate, according to civilisation, and inappropriate.

But I think, the Buddhist spoke about craving, or Duḥkha is the word he used, which is very difficult to translate, but it's a thirsting, a craving, a wanting, and that wanting, according to the Buddha, is the source of all of our suffering. And an example might be that you see the iPhone 12 or whatever it is, that hasn't come out yet, but you know it's coming, and you're saving, and you can't wait until it comes out, and every day you look and see when it's coming out, and you have a little separate account just for the iPhone 12, in case it's \$12,000 or whatever. And you read everything you can about the iPhone 12, morning til night, you're just thinking about, will I get a white one, a silver one, or what about rose gold, where did rose gold come from anyway, what am I gonna do, how big is it, shall I get a different wardrobe so it fits in my pocket, what shall I do?! And so you're completely in a state of despair, and you're out of your mind with worry, and all of a sudden it comes out, and it's exactly the amount of money in your account,

it's perfect, to the penny, \$15,487 and 28 cents, and now you have, in your hands, the iPhone 12, and you take it home, and finally you're happy!

Until... you realise, oh, the other one had that other kind of camera, that was the one I really wanted. And now we're on it already again, and what we're after is not the iPhone 12, what we're after is the relief of wanting an iPhone 12. It's the craving of the iPhone 12 that we're trying to get relief from. It's not the phone. It's the craving that we've created.

Addiction is essentially that writ large, in our hearts, bodies, souls. It's not that different from what the Buddha taught. But in a society that denies people value, nobility, magnificence, and financial sufficiency, medical care, the craving for something that will make it better is growing desperately in our country. It comes out sideways, in alcohol, opiates, and people are addicted to sex, drugs, rock and roll. I mean, we can become addicted to anything.

**Amanda 63:23**

Hey! By the way, look who you're talking to! If you have a rock and roll addiction, I support you.

**Wayne 63:29**

It's not that the sex or the drugs or the rock and roll are the problem, it's the craving, that we're not enough. We're not sufficient. We're not whole until this happens

**Amanda 63:41**

Well, this is the message we are hammered with from birth. You will be happy when...

**Wayne 63:51**

And then you will be enough. You will have enough.

**Amanda 63:53**

And then according to our tweet, which kicked off our session, then you'll be dead.

**Wayne 63:59**

Thank God!

**Amanda 64:00**

Thank Christ!

**Amanda 64:05**

This has been the Art of Asking Everything podcast, thank you so much for listening. I'm Amanda Palmer.

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For all of the music you heard in this studio, you can go to [amandapalmer.net/podcast](http://amandapalmer.net/podcast)

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That being said, you can follow me on social media, I'm everywhere [@amandapalmer](https://twitter.com/amandapalmer). And, for now, signing off, this is me, Amanda Fucking Palmer. I love you. See you next week. Keep on asking everything.