

Jerry: There we go. Hey Parker, how are you?

Parker: I'm good, Jerry. How you doing?

Jerry: Good, good.

Jerry: So here we are again, talking for our podcast, and, um, you know, what prompted me to- to suggest this was, um, reading an early draft of your new book, uh, uh, which is called On the Brink of Everything, and it's coming out in June.

Parker: June 26th is the- is the release date.

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Jerry: This was, I think, your 10th book. Is that right?

[00:03:00]

Parker: Correct. Yeah, and as I've told you, I- it took me 10 books to do it but I finally found a subject I know something about, aging.

Jerry: (laughs) Well, see- see, now- now that's what I want to talk to you about.

Parker: (laughs)

Jerry: I actually don't think the book is about aging. I think the book is about living.

Parker: Yes. I agree.

Jerry: You know. I think it's- it- it- it's a beautiful collection of essays, um, from the perspective of one who has lived and, uh, looking with that lens.

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Parker: I'm glad you said that, Jerry, as often you- you say the thing I need to hear that reminds me of- of why I wrote the book in the first place, because there's so much about aging in our culture that's about not living. It's about stopping to live, you know, to stop living or slow down your living or step aside from living, and I really wanted to write a book that says, "Live on, live on." Um, as you know, one of my tag lines in the book is, "Old is just another word for nothing left to lose. So get out there and take some creative risks on- on behalf of the common good." And I really feel that way. I think age ... I'll- I'll be 80 next February. I think age is a great privilege, for one thing. Not very many people get to make it this far in our world.

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[00:04:30] And I think with that privilege, you know, comes, for me at least, a sense of responsibility about investing myself in life, uh, on behalf in support of other people, and of course, that all comes back, uh ... to me in life giving ways.

[00:05:00] There are exceptions, obviously, where disability, ill- serious illness, shuts you down. But I've known people even under those circumstances who keep living ... right? ... to the last moment. And so this is ... you're right, this is a book about living.

Jerry: And- and- and I'm gonna, um, bring it back to, um, two things before we even dive in, and that is the- the title itself, which, uh, you lovingly, uh, uh, describe how you stole it.

Parker: (laughs) Right.

Jerry: Brilliant, um, terrific, wonderful friend and teacher of yours, Courtney Martin.

[00:05:30]
Parker: Right.

Jerry: To put that word in there, "teacher"?

Parker: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So Courtney, as you well know, is a little less than half my age. I started working with her when she was in her mid-20s and quickly identified her as someone from whom I could learn a great deal, and she called me a mentor, I called her a mentor from the beginning. I think mentoring is always a two way street. And I think that as- as you know, from the book, where I have a whole section on this subject, that reaching out to younger people is a very important part of living well as an older person. But the- the quick story, uh, that I think you're inviting me to tell about where I got the title is that both Courtney and I write for On Being, a project with which you're also involved and beloved to both of our arts. And, uh, we have weekly columns there, and one early morning, one winter morning here in Madison, Wisconsin, I was reading an essay, a beautiful essay by Courtney, about her then, I think, two-year-old daughter, Maya, um, who was- whom Courtney was watching with great appreciation and amazement as Maya discovered the world. Everything was new, everything was fresh. Um, and Courtney has- had this wonderful line, "Maya is on the brink of everything."

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[00:07:30] And as she went on to describe what she meant by that, I thought, "My goodness, here I am at ... " Then I think I was 76 or something like that. "Uh, here I am on the brink of everything, too." Um, I'm looking at the world through new eyes of appreciation and gratitude, the kind that- that you- that- that- the eyes that you open when you get to be older and you no longer assume that this is going to go on forever. So, you know, Maya is looking at everything afresh because she's not- never seen it before. I'm looking at everything afresh because I'm realizing I don't get to see it forever, and I want to see everything that's there in its truest and richest, uh, and- and loveliest, uh, form.

[00:08:00] So, uh, that's where the- that's where the title came from, and I instantly wrote Courtney and said, "I ... that's gonna be the title of this book I'm working on. Are you okay with me stealing it?" And of course, she said yes, and one of the early essays in the book tells the story that I just capsulized.

Jerry:
[00:08:30] Well, I, you know, at the risk of injecting my own meaning into the story, I will tell you that, uh, as I sit with the capacity to be on the brink of everything, um, I feel the ... at a deep, empathetic level, that same experience. Um, you and I have talked before about our- our, um, parallel journeys through depression, through midlife, through the- the path, and I find myself these days often saying to people that I encounter, not unlike what you said to me both in- in books and in real life, that there is this place that one gets to on the other side of that dip, on the other side of that, uh, overwhelming sense that there- that this is it, beyond "we" that can come in, and it is a refreshing new view. And so you may not be seeing things newly, for the first time, but you're seeing them anew.

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[00:09:30] And, you know, what I just wrote down is the- the brilliant title and concept of, uh, Suzuki Roshi's book, Zen Mind: Beginner's Mind.

Parker: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yes.

Jerry:
[00:10:00] And my dear friend, who's 79, was inspired by his dear friend, Maya, when she was two, and each of you have beginner's mind.

Parker:
[00:10:30] Yeah, I- that- thank you again for that. That came to me big time as I was writing this book and bouncing off of Courtney's essay, and as you know, in the book, the notion of beginner's mind pops up on several occasions, because I think it's so important to strip away, um, all of those screens and filters and assumptions that have probably been limiting your vision for a very long time, your vision and your- your action. And just start again. Begin again, uh, as one of my essays is- is- is titled. I- we both know this as writers. There are so many times in writing where the only answer is, "Begin again," and there are many times of the- of that in- in life as well. So rather than banging your head up against a wall and keep trying to move that chapter forward that just won't move, um, look at what you've done, walk around it, walk under it and over it, and figure out a better doorway into that subject, and begin again.

[00:11:00]

Jerry:
[00:11:30] It's a- it's a- it's a beautiful, uh, [inaudible 00:11:16] and it reminds me of when I was a kid and, uh, whenever we were playing wiffle ball in the street or stick ball in the streets of Brooklyn, and everybody would stop because we couldn't resolve the disagreement. Was the ball a foul? Was it in- whatever. We'd stop and we'd say, "Do over."

Parker: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Do over.

Jerry: And you have- you have an infinite number of do overs.

Parker: Right. That's right.

Jerry: And you know, you can- you can start and stop the game all over and you can- you can, uh, uh, really take another perspective on it, so ...

Parker: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:12:00]

Jerry: I- I- I really thank you for that, and- and for me, you know, in a sense, it- it sort of dovetails, in a way, with this beautiful question, um, that you explore in an essay called, um, Does My Life Have Meaning? Uh, which is, okay, and anybody who's listening to the podcast may go, "Oh, we're going there." Yeah, we're gonna go there.

Parker: (laughs)

[00:12:30]

Jerry: (laughs) And so does my life have meaning? Um ... I wanna read to you what you wrote. Um ... you say, "As I go deeper into elderhood, a question arises in me more often than it did when I was young. Sometimes I am able to affirm that I've made meaningful contributions in the least parts of my private and public lives, and at other times, everything I've done seems as flimsy and flammable as straw. If you've ever been downcast about the meaning of your life, you know that reassurance from others, no matter how generous, doesn't do the trick. The question of meaning is one that all of us must answer for ourselves."

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So ... tell me about that. Tell me about that realization.

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Parker: Well, you know that, um, as that chapter goes on, I decided it's not a good question, so I don't- I won't get too far ahead of the game. But let me, uh, a little spoiler alert that I end up saying it's not a good question. But I- I think, you know, certainly when I was younger, I was very, very driven by this desire to- to make a positive contribution, which I think most people want to do. But- but more than that, I was obsessed with I guess what I'd call the relation between means and ends.

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In other words, I had to calculate, figure out, actions that I could take, things I could do, that would result in positive outcomes for myself and- and other people. Um ... and- and, you know, over the years, when- when that's your calculus, like, I- I've gotta make that means-ends relationship work and I've gotta have evidence for it ... I'm- I've- I've never said that's- that's meaningless or a irrelevant question. But, um, it'll break your heart if you- life will break your heart if you cling to that means-ends

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[00:15:00] thing too tightly, because life is way too complicated to predict what's gonna happen when we toss a certain piece into the maelstrom and then wait at the other end of the tube, hoping and anticipating that that result will come out as we- and- as we predicted.

[00:15:30] Um, a lot of intervening variables along the way. Um, lots of things that you have to accommodate and- and go with, and- and here we come again, and I think to begin again, uh, uh, because when you don't get the result you want, what do you do? Do you throw up your hands and say, "Well, I- I just give up, because, you know, I- I thought I had it all figured out, but turns out I didn't, and I guess I'm no good at this job, or I guess the world sucks, or other people suck, and there- therefore, I won't- uh, I won't continue trying."

[00:16:00] So, you know, if- if you wanna find a way to continually invest yourself in a world where, um, we- we may- we may like to maintain the illusion that we're getting results, but we often don't. And in fact, if we think about, if I think about my greatest heroes, they weren't people who got results in anything like the bottom line terms that business talks about or that foundation executives want when they give you a grant. I mean, Martin Luther King, Jr. invested his life in something

[00:16:30] incredibly important, which will always be with us in this white supremacist, white racist society, and that, of course, is justice for all. Um, equity. And ... he didn't get the result he wanted. He gave his life for it. Every ounce of his life. But he didn't get the result he wanted.

[00:17:00] Do we admire him the less for the fact that vast historical forces have been at work and vast inner life forces have been at work pushing against justice for all? Do we admire him the less for not achieving his desired result? No, of course not. We admire him for making the effort in the most full hearted and full bodied terms one can imagine.

[00:17:30] So I take great learning from the fact that every one of my- every one of the people I admire, whether famous or not so famous, um, have- can be seen in- through that same lens. Um ... and so in some ways, I think, over the years, what I've searched for is an equation that keeps me at it and- and yes, of course, makes me wish for results, but doesn't leave me to bet the farm. Uh ... uh ... um, I'm getting the results that- that I desire. Um ... instead, the measure tends to be, "Am I giving myself to something that's worth giving myself to? Is it- is it life giving?"

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Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Parker: And can I hold even defeat or disappointment or despair in a way that becomes life giving for me and ultimately for- for others?

[00:18:30]
Jerry:

I think your response to the question ... which is not really an answer but it's really a, um, an, uh, an introspective unpacking of the question, is so beautiful and so well, uh, thought through. And I think about my clients and I think about the people in my life and I think about my own life and my own journey, and I think about that question: "Does my life have meaning?" And I- and- and to unpack it further, one of the things I'm drawn to is the- there are some implicit assumptions in the question, which is that if my life does not have those external outcomes which you spoke to, then it, um, it lacks meaning, but I suspect I then therefore lack a self-esteem, or I therefore then lack worthiness.

Parker: Right.

Jerry: There's an implicit question of my worthiness in that question.

Parker: Absolutely. Absolutely. And if you're using a measure of what makes you worthy that will never measure up, you have to ask yourself what kind of psychological or spiritual game am I playing? Am I looking for a way out by setting a standard that I can't- can't possibly live up to, which then results in me feeling unworthy, which then results in me having a- having an excuse for getting off the field and out of the game? Um, seems to me that that's the only question that you can ask. Um, people ask themselves other questions, like, "Maybe I'm not smart enough. Maybe I- you know, maybe if I choose- if I had a bigger grant, I could've done it, or if I had had smarter techniques or methodologies I could have done it." But it seems to be that in the long run, we're setting ourselves up for failure when we adopt a standard for ourself- not only for our work, but for ourselves, around what you rightly call worthiness, um, that is inherently self-defeating. Uh, I've just said- you know, I concluded a long time ago, there's enough forces in the world that wanna defeat me in living as fully as I can that I don't need to contribute to those forces myself, you know.

Jerry: Yeah.

Parker: Or as I've written in other places, I refuse to conspire in my own diminishment.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Parker: Um ... I think that's absolutely key, and to loop back just briefly to Martin Luther King, Jr. and other great leaders of movements ... uh, Rosa Parks and Dorothy Day and Vladislav Havel and on and on ... these were all people who took great risks because they refused to conspire in their own diminishment. Um ... and to me, that's- you know, that's a reliable guide for living. Day by day by day, am I making choices that are life giving for me and other people? Uh, or am I making choices that involve me conspiring in my own diminishment? In which case ... excuse me. In which case, I'm robbing the world of the only gift that I really have to give, which is the fullness of myself, um, which I've now lost.

Jerry: I often ... I often offer up to folks who come to me with similar kinds of questions the simple construct of striving for incremental progress that's direct- directionally correct. Just step by step, and- and- and, you know, as I- as I am hearing the two of us, I'm holding in my heart the- the ... uh ... entrepreneurs with whom we work so closely, the young folks, whether it's in- who are committed to social justice and social change or they- or the folks who are committed to, um, change in the business realm in a way that, in a sense, is so driven by those external metrics. And, um, uh, and- and I am- I am moved deeply by your- your notion that there's a- there's a setup in the entire equation. And- and I'll acknowledge that a lot of the external forces, a lot of the external messages, are actually antithetical to- to what you're suggesting right now, where- where they will use something as, um, something like, uh, salary as a metric of meaning, or, um, or they will mistake a- a notion of frenetic motion ...

Parker: Right.

Jerry: ... for meaning. Or they will mistake a, uh, a sense of external validation that, you know, in the- in the startup world that may come from someone blessing you and anointing your company with a large valuation, or the public buying your stock in some way or another. And- and ... the only thing that I have come to- and I have been subject to all of those forces. I have, uh, striven to be a prince of New York. Um, a master of the universe, in Tom Wolfe's, uh, world. And the only thing that I can really, um, speak to ... not by way of advice, is to simply say ... how have you lived your life?

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Parker: Right. Absolutely.

Jerry: You know, I'll- I'll- I'll say- I'll share with you something, um, that happened just yesterday in a- in the- in a session with a client. It was the first session and we were just beginning to get to know each other and- and I spoke about the work that we try to do. And- and stealing a line from the poet David Whyte, "We often speak of good work done well for the right reasons."

Parker: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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Jerry: And I quoted that and I said to the client, you know, "Oftentimes I'm able to put my head down on the pillow at night and say, 'Good work, Jerry. Done well. For the right reasons.' Careful there, buddy boy. Watch those reasons."

Parker: (laughs)

Jerry: And he looked at me and it almost broke my heart. He said, "I can never feel that."

"I have never felt that," is what he said.

Parker: Never. Yeah.

Jerry: And he is incredibly successful.

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Parker: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. Yeah. And you're- you know, what- one of the things that touches me about that story, Jerry, is that you're using your own prior experience of woundedness around that to try to help him heal from that wound that- that- this whole wounded healer motif has always meant a lot to me, because we all get wounded by this stuff. Um, my metrics have been different from those of the entrepreneurs you work with. That's not been my world. But I've had equivalent metrics, that's for sure.

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My- my word for what you're talking about is intentionality. I think- I think all I can control in my life is my intentionality. But I can do that only by maintaining a high degree of self consciousness and honest self-honesty around what my intentionality is.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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Parker: Because we all know it's really, really easy to fool yourself about these things.

Jerry: Amen.

Parker: It's one of our master arts as human beings, is self deception. And- and so conversations of the sort that you are- that you have with your clients, conversations of- of the sort that have helped me so much, um, have- have all been around, "Well, let's test that out," you know.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Parker: Uh ... is this really- is this really, uh, a noble enterprise in terms of your intentionality? Not that it's ignoble. Not that you're trying to do evil. But do your intentions contain the seeds of their own destruction, I think is always an interesting question.

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Thomas Merton, as you know, one of my heroes ... I write about him at length in the book ... um, wrote a book called Seeds of Destruction, and it was really about looking inward, both as individuals and as a society, about the seeds that are growing bad fruit, that- that bring us down, poison plants that bring us down. So this whole intentionality question, and whether it's by yourself or- or with others ...

I think it has to be both, uh, really ... um, trying to discern your ... the- your true intentions and trying to stay as true to them as possible.

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Jerry: Um, I can see the usefulness of non-delusional ... non-self lacerating, honest reflection of the positive and negative, the altruistic and neurotic, the- the- the good and the evil intentions ... evil's probably too strong a word ... behind all of the things that we do in the pursuit of that meaning, in the pursuit of that life with purpose.

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Parker: Right. That's exactly right. Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: You know, in this essay, you come to this beautiful spot where you're talking about ... and I- I won't be able to pronounce his name ...Czeslaw Milosz?

Parker: Yes, right. Czeslaw Milosz.

Jerry: Oh. And his poem, Love, which ...

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Parker: It's a wonderful poem. It really- it was just ... it's a brief poem but it was just such a wake up call for me.

Jerry: Yeah. I'm- I'm gonna read it because I have it in front of me.

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Love. Love means to learn to look at yourself the way one looks at distant things, for you are only one thing among many, and whoever sees that way heals his heart, without knowing it, from various ills. A bird in a tree, say to him, "Friend." Then he wants to use himself and things so that they stand in the glow of ripeness. It doesn't matter whether he knows what he serves. Who serves best doesn't always understand.

Parker: I just ... I just adore that- that poem. How these poets do it in just 8 or 10 lines, I have no idea. But, you know, because it takes me whole books to do it. Shelves of books to do it. But I- I love that poem. Um ... just starting with those lines, "Love means to- to learn to look at yourself the way one looks at distant things, for you are only one thing among many." It just- that's- that's simple insight, that you are one thing among many, and many is a mild word for- for how many you are one thing among.

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I- I think I've told you before, Jer- Jerry, I'm- I'm not prone to mystical experience, even though I'm drawn to writers who- who have that kind of experience. But I think I did have one, maybe two, mystical experiences, and one of them was in the high desert up around Taos, New Mexico. I was walking across the desert at the foot of the San de Cristo Mountains, and I was in a place where you could see or

[00:31:30] hear nothing human made. Um ... I was all by myself. And all of the sudden, I had this kind of stunning insight that, call it what you will ... the universe, the cosmos ... was utterly indifferent to me and utterly accepting of me or forgiving of me. And I think I learned in that moment that indifference and forgiveness, indifference and acceptance, are- are just breathing in and breathing out, you know? They- they're the- they're two sides of the same thing.

[00:32:00] Um ... I'm not- I'm not special the way I like to think of myself as being special. Um ... I am one thing among many. Many, many, many, many. And the universe is, in that sense, indifferent to me. But also profoundly accepting of me, and I- I don't know how to make the distinction anymore. But I do find that when I can reclaim that primal experience, which could- can never really be put into words ... I'm sure you know what I mean. It was just in my bones. It was bone deep knowledge that I can barely raise to articulation.

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Whenever I can return to that- that primal knowing, I'm at peace ... uh ... with whatever I'm doing, and with however it's going. And it actually liberates me to give more, not less.

[00:33:00] Jerry: It- uh, that was beautiful. I, um ... it makes me see this point in the horizon where indifference and acceptance, true radical acceptance, actually converge, and, um, while it- it may be a struggle for my ego to give up my belief in my specialness, um, [00:33:30] the liberating side, for me, is that it allows me to give up my belief in my awfulness at the same time.

Parker: Yep. Yep. Yep.

Jerry: And from that place, to then go to what the- the- the poet, um, brings the attention to is ... it doesn't matter to know whether or not you have meaning. It matters to know whether or not you've served.

[00:34:00] Parker: Ex- exactly. Who serves best doesn't always understand, and a little earlier in the poem, "whoever sees this way heals his heart". And that's the healing you're talking about in terms of the awfulness that we feel about ourselves. You know, one of the things that I say in the book, um, in the prelude to the book is, um, that I really I'm- I'm surprised to be on the brink of everything, you know, I'm surprised to be [00:34:30] looking straight ahead at my 80th birthday. Um ... but I- I'm also surprised to find how much I like it.

[00:35:00] I like being here. And one of the reasons that I write about that I like being here is that from the brink, I have this full panorama of my life, past, present, and future. I can see all of that with a clarity that I think has often eluded me in life. And one of the things that I see, looking back, which I so much value, is this intricately woven

tapestry of life, which consists of many, many, many, many threads. I mean, we all are pulling threads behind us as we go and we're weaving them into the threads pulled by other people and by events in- in the world, events in which we're involved or events that have implications for us, books we read, thing- you know, things we do, etc., etc.

[00:35:30] And I can clearly remember days in my younger years when I thought, "Oh my God. I wove that ugly, ugly thread into my life. I wish I could just pull it out." But what I can see now is how everything belongs, and how even the- the dark threads ... call

[00:36:00] them that if you well ... contribute to the resilience of the fabric. And to its beauty. I think it was Joseph Campbell who said, "There is no work of art without the dark thread." Um, you need that contrast for other things to show up.

[00:36:30] And so I no longer wanna pull those threads out. Um ... it's not only that I can't, but it's that I value them in a new way, and they do have- they do have to do with resilience. Um, I think both you and I have been on journeys, as you mentioned earlier, with things like clinical depression, that were very dark threads in our lives. You know, it- it felt life threatening, and it was indeed life threatening.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Parker: But, um ... there- there was- there was meaning and value in that experience once we survived it, once we came through, and once we were able to explore it and try to understand it and try to make meaning out of it. Just- just as you made meaning out of it with this client you met this morning or yesterday, most recently, um ...

[00:37:00] who- with whom you were using your own woundedness around some of his struggles in order to give him a different way to look at things. I mean, that's- that's about not trying to pull a thread out of your life, not trying to deny that that fabric is your fabric, not trying to pretend that you are not all of the above, you know, as- as you and I have said to each other from time to time. We are all of the above.

[00:37:30] Um ... but it's about, um, serving. And it doesn't matter whether he knows ... I'm reading the poet now ... who he serves or what he serves. Who serves best doesn't always understand. And I just think that's absolutely true. Have you- have you not had the experience ... I certainly have ... of people coming to you and saying, "Thank you so much for what you said to me that evening that we met five years ago." I can't even remember the person. I can't remember the meeting.

Jerry: I can barely remember the night.

Parker: Right. I can't remember what I said. But that person will say, "You really changed my life by paying attention to me and by saying something that I've been thinking about ever since."

Jerry: Yeah.

Parker: Well, you didn't know you did that. And that's how you served best.

Jerry: Yeah.

Parker: You know, that could well be one of the most important things you've ever done.

Jerry: Yeah. The, uh ... thank you for that. It ... it- it comes- it- it brings to mind, um, uh, a notion ... and I'll- I'll have mangled this a little bit because I'm not remembering it precisely, but I have been told that Carl Jung used to refer to "the slender threads" that connect it all, and your imagery of those threads brought to mind this notion of the dark thread is the light thread and the thread- it's just the threads that connect everything, and that brings to mind something. Last summer I was
[00:39:00] traveling in Tibet, um, with, um, one of my favorite human beings on the planet, a- a fellow named Al Doan, who's actually been on the podcast, and Al and his wife, Drea, um, uh, came on the trip, and they're Mormon. And many evenings we would sit and we would talk comparative religion, if you will. And, uh, he gave me the-
[00:39:30] the- the imagery of tender mercies, and- and I think that to link these two concepts together, tender mercies are the- are the ways in which the Divine, whether or not you believe in the mystical, shows up in a way- the way it showed up for you in the mountains outside of Taos or, um, you know, just in the simple way in which our-
[00:40:00] our lives, Parker, became entwined.

Parker: Right. Right.

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Jerry: Simple emails. "Hey," you know, or- or a connecting point between you and Courtney, which has become a- a deep and rich and multi-varied thread in the fabric of your lives.

Parker: Right.

Jerry: Um ... and- and I think that when we deny the dark thread, we close ourselves off to the tender mercies.

Parker: Absolutely. Absolutely we do. I mean, to deny the dark thread is to say, "I don't
[00:41:00] want to look at any part of my life or anybody's life that has the dark thread in it." It's to really limit your range of vision. Uh ... you know, you- you cut your perspective down to about 10 degrees, if that. Um, and- and so em- embracing the dark thread and acknowledging and accepting the dark thread, um, is to open your eyes and to be aware that those tender mercies may come with the first flower of
[00:41:30] spring, the first cardinal of spring, as they have done for us here in the- in the Midwest, where we had a long, hard winter and a very cold spring. Um ... the smile of a child, the kindness of a stranger ... uh ... etc., etc., etc. Things that just kind of

lighten your life and do, in fact, provide those tender mercies. I like that- I like that phrase a lot.

Jerry: [00:42:00] I- I think, too, that when we put our pursuit of purpose and meaning through the filter of what is the outcome by which that will be measured, what is the external output, we are, in effect, denying the threads that actually exist.

Parker: Right.

Jerry: We are, in fact, denying the ways in which we are in service. Even if what our service is nothing more than getting in a yellow cab in New York City and saying to the driver, "How are you?"

[00:42:30]

Parker: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly.

Jerry: You know, I- I- I did that shortly after the Muslim ban, and the driver, um, with the- the ... let's- let's use proper language. The attempt to ban people from seven different countries that were predominantly Muslim.

Parker: Right.

[00:43:00]

Jerry: And I did- I said that to a driver and he looked at me through the- the rear view mirror and he said, "Inshallah"

Parker: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: And I heard of- this wonderful little story about having been a doctor in Pakistan and having to be forced out ...

Parker: Yeah.

Jerry: ... because of opposing the government, and bringing his children, who are now teachers in New York.

Parker: Exactly. And probably wonderful teachers.

Jerry: And I ... my life was better.

Parker: Yep.

Jerry: And hopefully his life was better.

Parker: Yep.

[00:43:30]

Jerry: And I will never forget that little tender mercy.

Parker: Yep.

Jerry: You know, that little slender thread.

Parker: Yeah. Yeah.

Jerry: Or that little experience.

Parker: Yep.

Jerry: That made a difference.

Parker: I- I did something the other day that still makes me glow, uh, because it's often when you have the wit to extend a tender mercy that you benefit as much as when one is extended to you. And I learned this one from my wife, Sharon, whom you know, um, very well, and ...

[00:44:00]

Jerry: The smarter, uh, half of the two of you.

Parker: Yeah, smarter and the prettier for sure.

Jerry: Oh, sure.

Parker: (laughs) So I- I was in the men's room at, I think, the Detroit Airport or ... I've been in so many lately, I'm not sure.

Jerry: (laughs)

Parker: And, um ...

Jerry: Airports, not men's rooms?

Parker: Both.

Jerry: (laughs)

Parker: (laughs) Remember, I'm almost 80.

Jerry: (laughs)

[00:44:30]

Parker: I mean, I have all of the above. I'm not denying any of it. So, um, there was this attend- uh, attendant in there. Half of the urinals were closed down as he was doing this hard job of cleaning them. I mean, the- the unwashed public leaves such terrible messes, you know. And I know, because when I was a kid, I worked on the Lake Michigan Beach near Chicago and my job was to clean public restrooms and I- I grew distrustful of the great unwashed American public at that time. How I ever bounced back I don't know. A lot of therapy, I guess.

Jerry: (laughs)

Parker: Anyway, as I was leaving, because the- the urinals on my side of the restroom were sparkling clean, I- and I- I'm able to do this. I pulled a \$20 bill out of my wallet and I handed it to him and I said, "I just wanna thank you for keeping this place so clean for travelers like me. It really means a lot." And he looked at me and he- he said, uh, uh, "I don't think I can take that." And I said, "Of course you can. You've earned it. You've earned my gratitude, so please accept this as just a thank you of one guy passing through who's grateful for the hard work you do." And I just left. And he had this smile on his face that was just, um ... so ... genuine and so humanly connective. So it's- it's so often, you know, one of the great wounds in our world is people feeling unseen and unheard, and, um, to see them and hear them is this- the easiest and one of the most rewarding things we can do.

And I'll- I'll just say one more thing, Jerry, that we've talked about before, but I think it has a place here, looped back into this larger subject of getting hooked on outcomes, rather than just on, you know, what Gandhi called these expressive acts. The- the- these are not instrumental acts, asking the cab driver how he is and speaking about, uh, you being in grief about America's posture on people- on countries that are predominantly Muslim, or me giving this man a well earned gift for his efforts. These are expressive acts. They're not instrumental. They're not meant to get us anywhere in the world or achieve an outcome.

But when we get hooked on outcomes, what happens time after time after time is that we take on smaller and smaller tasks, because they're the only ones you can get outcomes on. So as I've often said, um, in our conversations and elsewhere,

we're- we're no longer interested in this country in educating children. We're just- we're just interested in getting kids to pass tests. And that's not the same as educating children. You have a daughter who's a very fine teacher. You know this, she knows this, all good teachers know this. And all good teachers are fighting the fight of their lives these days against high stakes standardized testing. It's not that they don't ... you know, it's not that they or their kids shouldn't be held accountable for learning, but kids learn at different pace- paces, they learn in different ways, they have very different starting points, and if we're gonna educate then we need to ease up on measuring and get back to treasuring.

[00:48:30]

Uh ... I think there's just millions of kids in this country who are yearning to be treasured rather than measured, and the measuring comes from people saying, "I've gotta achieve outcomes, so I'll stop caring about educating a child and I'll care only about getting them to pass tests. And if I can't get them to pass tests honestly, I'll sneak into the building at night, I'll change the answers on the test sheets, and I'll get a merit raise or the school will be allowed to- to stay in business." That ... you know, people are serving time in prison for doing that kind of thing. But not everyone who has done it is in prison. Some of them are still doing it.

So this is a high stakes business, um, where- where we are in this matter of outcomes, not only for ourselves but for the larger society.

[00:49:00]

Jerry:

Yeah, I- I think you- your- your example is- is deeply moving and- and to go back to the Detroit Airport bathroom for a moment, that was ... I hear the expressive act, the Gandhi and expressive act, and I hear it as an expression of kindness. And sometimes, to go back to this core purpose of, "Does my life have meaning?" The question is, "Are you kind?"

[00:49:30]

Parker:

Yes. Absolutely. And-

Jerry:

You know, and in- in a sense, this kindness- because kindness may be the way in which you are called to serve.

Parker:

Yeah.

Jerry:

Incrementally, day by day.

Parker:

[00:50:00]

I- I- I agree with that. For me, right alongside that word kindness, it's doing a dance with the word gratitude. Um ... because basically, I was grateful for that man. And, um, you know, there I was, benefiting from his labors while watching him labor on the other side of the bathroom, and just realizing that he had work that I couldn't do day in and day out. Um, I- I would become so demoralized. And my sense of gratitude led him to do- led me to do what I did.

[00:50:30]

So it- it's- it's an- it's an interesting- it's an interesting place to be, and I- and I- I- I know that it's not only possible but it's highly desirable to cultivate gratitude at earlier stages of life, um, and wise people do that. I don't think I've been lacking in that. But I have noticed as I've aged that my sense of gratitude for everything just helps, and what's interesting is that when- I mean, life is complicated, right? When your gratitude rises, so does your outrage at things of- of the sort that impinge on the lives of that Pakistani cab driver and this gentleman working in the men's bathroom at the Detroit Airport. The- the racism, the xenophobia, the economic inequalities, the- the stagnation of wages for the working poor. Um ... you know,

[00:51:00]

[00:51:30]

the- my outrage at the forces that are keeping all of that in place, um, is ... is amped up by the gratitude I have for people who are doing that kind of work.

[00:52:00] It- it- there's something about kindness and about gratitude ...

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Parker: ... that makes us feel more deeply the ecosystem in which we're embedded. You know-

Jerry: Right, lace your fingers and there's an interconnectedness ...

Parker: Yeah.

Parker: Yeah, exactly. It's not like- I'm- no, I'm- I- I know I've worked hard and all of that. I know that I've, you know, spent millions of hours writing and getting educated and creating projects and programs, but I haven't really done- done all this on my own. I've done it with a massive support system, which I'll just call the ecosystem of life. And, um, gratitude and kindness I think really, uh, really intensify our understanding of being embedded in that ecosystem.

[00:52:30]

Jerry: I mean, I'll go back to your- to- to your story for a moment. There's an act of gratitude and kindness in that gentleman's care and concern that he took to cleaning that side of the bathroom.

[00:53:00]

Parker: Yep.

Jerry: And there was an act of gratitude and kindness in your acknowledgement of that, regardless of whether or not you had given him \$20.

Parker: Right.

Jerry: And- and there's a mutuality of that experience which I'll interject the word community into your ecosystem.

Parker: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:53:30]

Jerry: Um, uh, in that moment, um, it didn't ... your specialness and your awfulness no longer, um, existed. You were one of many ...

Parker: Right.

Jerry: ... just as he was one of many.

Parker: Right.

Jerry: And we were one- ones of many together.

Parker: Right. Right. Absolutely. We're all in this together, and that's- that's good news.

[00:54:00]

Jerry: That- and- and- and- and so the question doesn't be- isn't, as you say, the question isn't, "Does my life has meaning?" as, "Can we be all in this together? Can we be human together?"

Parker: Right. Yeah, absolutely. Seems like a simple question. Seems like it would have a simple answer. But I don't know, somehow we've complexified it in this country and, uh, we- we need to help each other come up with the right answers to that, because I think a lot rides on- on them.

[00:54:30]

Jerry: Well, I think, you know, here again, this is one of many beautiful subjects that you play with and- and, uh, really, uh, explore well in this book and- and I just wanna thank you for that, for the kindness of that.

Parker: Thank you. Thank you, Jerry, it's- it's just a- such a honor and pleasure always to talk with you and- and to have talked with you over the months and years when we've both been working on our own stuff. I'm looking forward to yours coming out and, uh, maybe I'll start running my own podcast by then and interview you.

[00:55:00]

Jerry: (laughs) You got it.

Parker: (laughs) [inaudible 00:55:11]

Jerry: That'll be [inaudible 00:55:14]. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show and- and I just appreciate you and, um, you take care of yourself.

Parker: Thank you. Always an honor, really. Take care.

Jerry: Yeah.

Parker: Bye bye.