

Jerry: Good morning, Fleet. It's a delight to see you.

Fleet Maull: Good to see you.

Jerry: Um, welcome to the show. And, um, before we get started, could you take a moment and just introduce yourself to our audience.

Fleet Maull: [00:00:30] (laughs). Okay, let's see what I should say. Okay, well, my name is Fleet Maull and, uh, I live in Hatfield, Massachusetts, in the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts with my partner, Sophie. I recently brought out a book, *Radical Responsibility*, which I think we're gonna talk today. Uh, the subtitle is, uh, *How to Move Beyond Blame Fearlessly, Live your Highest Purpose, and Become an Unstoppable Force for Good*. Quite a mouthful. (laughs). And, um, that radical responsibility, um, model and, and, uh, it really runs through all the work that I do. Um, I spent-

[00:01:00]

Jerry: Oh, oh, before we go into that, I'm going to interrupt you.

Fleet Maull: ... Yeah.

Jerry: You're much more than what you just shared.

Fleet Maull: Huh?

Jerry: Tell us a little bit about... You're much more than what you just shared. You're one of my favorite Dharma teachers. And you're an activist. And you, yourself are a force for good.

Fleet Maull: (laughs).

[00:01:30]

Jerry: See, I'm gonna make you, I'm gonna, he's blushing folks. (laughing). Tell us a little bit more about your, your role as a teacher and perhaps even, uh, some of the work you do in, in the, uh, law enforcement community.

Fleet Maull: Yeah. Well, you know, a lot of what I do today is grounded in the fact that I spent 14 years in a federal prison on drug charges, uh, for, for drug trafficking.

[00:02:00] Something I got involved in as I, as I, I got, as a young man, you know, full of shame, and a, a, you know, a big hole in my gut. A, a ty... classic angry young man. Graduating from high school in 1968. Um, I just went headlong into the counterculture and, and I ended up living outside the country as an alienated expat and fell in the small time drug trafficking to kind of live outside the system and justified that with all kinds of us versus them thinking and justifications. Uh, continued, I was always a spiritual seeker, and continued that before I could untangle it all. I ended up, uh, earning my way into a federally funded sabbatical for 14 years, and uh...

[00:02:30]

Jerry: (laughs).

Fleet Maull: And then really had to face the really harmful things I'd been involved in. And I had this kind of mixed life, you know, I had always been involved in, in uh, uh, you know, in trying to do good, and trying to evolve spiritually. I, and I actually it worked out that when I went to prison, I had a master's degree in
[00:03:00] Contemplative Psychotherapy from Naropa University. I studied with a, an incredible Tibetan master, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, for 10 years, so I had a lot of training. But I hadn't managed to untangle my life yet at that point.

And I really had to face, first of all I had to face what I had done to my son, who was nine years old without, gotta grow up without a dad. And uh, then as I spent time in 12 step groups dealing with my own substance abuse issues and listening to the story of one man after another talking about how their lives and their family lives had unraveled around cocaine use, I had to really face the incredibly harmful activity I had been involved in. And, and so, you know, that whole prison system, early on, was a real dark matter in the sole
[00:03:30] experience and then eventually became an incredibly transformative path.

So, you know, what I do today, both as a Dharma teacher, as an, as a, as a business consultant, executive coach, and seminar leader, and all the different spirits that I work in, really comes out of that path and that experience of 14 years in prison. Of just embracing being, uh, in a very hellish environment and fortunately having gone in with some skills, and, uh, some, uh, transmission and competence of my own innate goodness, which was incredibly powerful there, because it's an environment where your basic, um, humanity and dignity, uh, and any sense of self-worth is under assault 24/7. From the environment. From the staff. From your fellow prisoners. I mean, yo- yo-, 20
[00:04:00] demeaning, demeaning encounters would be an average day. [crosstalk 00:04:27] environment, so what I do today comes out of that, that's what I teach from.
[00:04:30]

Jerry: There's a phrase I often use, which is when, when I'm in dialogue with folks, I, I often feel like we encounter speed bumps.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And speed bumps is my term for those emotional moments where something really large has just been said.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Or felt.

Fleet Maull: Yeah.

[00:05:00]

Jerry: And, um, I could be wrong here, but, um, the feeling I have is that you've told that story so often in your life, that the s... the height of the speed bump doesn't seem so high to you anymore.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And I just wanna pause and ack- acknowledge and honor everything that you just said.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Um, and what I'm hearing is that, that the brokenhearted experience that you went through, and the pain and suffering that you went through, in forms everything that you do, as a man today. Am I getting that right?

[00:05:30]

Fleet Maull: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and you're right. You know, I mean, I, I actually kind of avoid telling that story these days and, and, uh, you know, it's a long story, and it's elaborate story, so it's how, how much to go into. But, but it was, um, you know, just into the depth of fear and pain and vulnerability and heartbreak and shame and just everything you can imagine. And having to somehow rediscover my, my dignity, uh, and courage and strength to go forward in that world, and, uh, it was really, you know, incredible, um, advanced, um, training path for me. You know, I wouldn't, I wouldn't of chosen it and I wouldn't, uh, wish it on anyone, but, uh, fortunately I landed there with the background to take advantage of it. And, and really go into it, uh, really deeply. Un- unfortunately that same experience is mostly debilitating and damaging for most people. Uh, I was very fortunate that I'd already had a lot of preparation. Uh, you know-

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[00:06:30]

Jerry: Yes, yes, and we'll circle back to this, but I'm going to acknowledge right here, right now in this moment, that there is something basically and fundamentally good about you. That got tapped into.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:07:00]

Jerry: And, uh, because there are many, many people who could've chosen a different way to respond to the experience that you had.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And, I'm excited to explore in depth, the linkage between your notion of radical responsibility and this experience, your Dharma teaching, your understanding of the Dharma. And, equally important from where I sit, the

work you're doing in the world. To kind of break some of the cycles of pain and suffering.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:07:30]

Jerry: Um, and, you know, I, I honor and recognize that, um, that's a hot spot to touch. But it feels like, uh, that past.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: But it feels like if we were not to ground the conversation in that connected place, in that place of, uh, strength, um, we might be untethered-

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: ... in the conversation.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:08:00]

Jerry: So, um, I appreciate this as part of the, the opening background (laughs) and conversation.

Fleet Maull: Well, I welcome that actually, and I, I really appreciate your, your pausing to, uh, to honor and invite that and, uh, sometimes I feel that that part of my life is a little bit extraterrestrial in terms of the rest of the world. Like how to give people context for it and, uh, to appreciate it. I mean everybody, you know, kinda, "Oh you spent 14 years in prison." It's like, "Wow." People appreciate that I've done good things with my life. But in terms of really being able to draw someone into what that journey was like, it's, uh, it, it feels daunting to, to do that.

[00:08:30]

Jerry: Well, you know, uh, we've, we've really deep... begun deepening our relationship in our encounters and I know that, um, you're, you're in the midst of reading my book and, um, you know that one of my basic premises is that, if, if we are going to put ourselves in a position of helping others, then we ourselves have to stand in that spot.

[00:09:00]

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Um.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And I see you as doing that in a really beautiful, um, way in modeling that. So I just want to acknowledge your warriorship and your courage with regard to that.

Fleet Maull:
[00:09:30] Thank you. Well I, I was, uh, somehow stumbled into being at the right place at the right time. Or the wrong place at the right time. (laughing). Uh, uh, after, after spending 10 incredible years training with, uh, someone like Trungpa Rinpoche and, um, so...

Jerry: Well, what would he have said since you knew him so well? What would he have said about whether or not you were in the wrong place at the wrong time or the right place at the right time? What would he have said?

Fleet Maull:
[00:10:00] Well, he actually, um, when people were asking him about me, you know, how I would do, or they were very, expressing a lot of concern about, about me. Actually, you know, he, um, uh, when I knew I was likely gonna go to prison for a long time, and, uh, even before I was indicted, actually. Um, but I had already made arrangements to turn myself in if I was indicted, um, most likely, anyway. But I had put it out there and like, "What should I do with this? Is this some kind of, you know, social, cultural, should I just escape and go to India or something and, or do I need to stay and face this, or what should I do?" And, and I didn't really want to burden him with that, but he was my teacher. I didn't know where else to go with it.

[00:10:30] And, uh, so, um, a friend of mine took that message to him, uh, in Canada, where he was at the time. And sp... he spent about a week with it. Sitting with it. And then he sent a message back, "You need to stay and face it." And he said, uh, "If you're on the run, it's gonna be really hard for you to continue, um, your path and, and your relationship with me and, and, uh, and doing our work together. Uh, but if you're lock... even if you're locked up for decades, uh, you can still do the work." And so I've always been really grateful. Never regretted, uh, the decision. That was really the first time I ever followed anybody's advice.

Jerry: (laughs).

Fleet Maull:
[00:11:30] Previously, all... if you wanted me to go one way, just tell me to go the other way, right? So, um, uh, but I've never regretted, uh, following that advice, as difficult as the journey was. And he told people one time... I, I always found this a bit humorous. But, uh, you know, in the Tibetan tradition, well, a- as well as in Hinduism, there's the term siddhi, um, S-I-D-D-H-I, uh, which is very sort of abilities, powers, capacities, extraordinary capacities, and what have you. And of course the, the ultimate siddhi is enlightenment or liberation. And, uh, he said, uh, he said, uh, he told other people I was gonna attain the siddhi of federal prison. (laughing). Whatever that would mean.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Stay and face it.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Stay and face it.

Fleet Maull: Yeah.

Jerry: [00:13:00] Now, I can project all sorts of connections here, but I'm gonna let you fill in the blank. What's the relationship between stay and face it and radical responsibility.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And, even more, give us the definition of radical responsibility as you see it.

Fleet Maull: [00:13:30] Well I talk about radical responsibility in different ways, but, uh, kind of distilling it down, it's voluntarily embr... in, within a context of extraordinary self-compassion, it's voluntarily embracing one hundred percent responsibility, ownership for each and every circumstance we face in life. Internally within ourselves and in the world around us. And, uh, when, you know, when you think about that, it's a pretty radical notion. We, it's, we pretty quickly, um, blame things we're experiencing, even within ourselves, on outside circumstances. But we certainly blame external circumstances on other people and things. And it seems very compelling to portion out the blame at times.

[00:14:00] Um, but the idea here, is really that, um, the only real place we have any influence is with ourselves. And any real power. And from a pers... from a place of radical responsibility, we can be a positive influence in a world. But, the place where it starts, is really, for me, it's owning our own circumstances. And in prison, I realized very early on, when I got to federal prison, even, I was in a county jail for seven months going through trial and sentencing, which was a really hellish experience. Federal prison was almost a relief from that experience. Uh, but I got there, and I, and I realized that, you know, the culture

[00:14:30] I was in, um, were traumatized human beings, who were, had been just, you know, um, were just buried under a mountain of shame and guilt and demonization from their arrest forward. And, in order to survive, just even, you know, sort of psychically, spiritually, just survive, they armor themselves up with denial and, uh, anger and, uh, bitterness, and so forth.

[00:15:00] And, it was really clear to me I didn't want to come out of, and, and everybody's, you know, the world perceives all, all of us in prison as perpetrators of some kind. All prisoners perceive themselves as victims, of one kind or another. And actually most of them have been victimized in their

childhoods. But they feel victimized by the system. They have a whole victim narrative and, or by their fall partners, their lawyers, and so forth [inaudible 00:15:20].

[00:15:30] So, um, you know, I was, it was really clear to me that I did not want to come out of prison angry and bitter and with a, a, that kind of victim identity. And I didn't want to live that way in prison. You know. I don't want to live my life that way. It was really clear to me, fortunately I had had enough training before I went in, that I, it was absolutely clear to me that, that the only way out and through for me, was to just embrace radical ownership for having gotten myself into that situation to begin with. Like just forget about all of the other contributors (laughs) to my situation. And focus on that, that this, you know, regardless of what went down with anybody else, or the system, or other people that helped me, you know, that didn't, that I, I did a lot of people's time, right? So [inaudible 00:16:06] worked out was the reason I got such a sentence, I did a lot of people's time because I was the one who wouldn't cooperate. But, I just completely let go of all that. In fact, included all of those in my Tonglen practice.

Jerry: Your Tonglen practice refers to the taking and sending-

Fleet Maull: Right.

[00:16:30]
Jerry: ... and transforming of other people's pain.

Fleet Maull: It's a core practice in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and has correlates in other Buddhist traditions. And it's a practice of the heart. A practice of compassion. Where we actually, uh, take on other's pain and suffering. And, uh, and allow that to be transformed within the vast empty spaciousness of our own heart.

Jerry: Okay.

Fleet Maull: And, uh, and then send out, instead, loving-kindness and basic goodness, and, uh, so-

Jerry: I wanna, I wanna jump in-

[00:17:00]
Fleet Maull: ... that's how I worked with all that.

Jerry: I wanna jump in and parse this a little bit because I think what you're saying is, again, um, profound, and, uh, interwoven. Because what I'm hearing is, what, part of what makes us radical, is the assumption of responsibility, um, you know, one of my core organizing questions that I will ask people is, "How have I been complicit in creating the conditions I say I don't want?"

[00:17:30]

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Now, I make a distinction between compliciteness and responsibility. Because, in my experience, when we start to go deep in those co... on that, on that experience, the blaming, shaming mindset, um, flips from it's everybody else's fault to it's all my fault.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:18:00]

Jerry: And there's a loss of, what I often consider, kind of discernment, which is, wa-wa- wait a minute. There's actually, it, there's a complex situation that's occurred here. Um, and so I may take responsibility, but I don't necessarily take on the self-lacerating guilt that is complete.

Fleet Maull: Absolutely. And you're right at the core distinction in the book now. And this model is completely, sometimes, I say transblame, or beyond blame. And, and we've all be enculturated that either someone else has to be blamed, or I'm gonna have to take the blame. And we've all experienced plenty of blame and shame in our lives we don't want anymore. So we instinctually deflect and instinctually blame. You know.

[00:18:30]

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Fleet Maull: I remember Joseph Goldstein, uh, I had a video of his in prison from a retreat out in California. And he was telling a story about himself and that he was like at some retreat and he was in the cafeteria and where you go up and you have your tray and, you know, you go. And, uh, somehow one of the chafing, lids of a chafing dish got knocked off and hit the floor, banging, all that noise, right?

[00:19:00] And he just immediately went, "It wasn't me."

Jerry: Right.

Fleet Maull: You know?

Jerry: Right.

Fleet Maull: Just like that.

Jerry: Right.

Fleet Maull: And he goes-

Jerry: Right.

Fleet Maull: ... "What was that about? What was that about?" So-

Jerry: Right, right, right, and in that beautiful story, there's this two-step process. This little dance that he did, which was it was me, everybody thought it was me, it's not me. So he's defending against that.

Fleet Maull: ... Yeah, yeah. So, you know, there is an alternative to blame. So radical responsibility is not about blaming others, obviously. But it's completely not about blaming ourselves.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:19:30]

Fleet Maull: And it's certainly not about blaming victims other, either. So, it requires a ground of tremendous self-compassion and all the work of, uh, developing radical metta or loving-kindness or maitri. And really doing that work to co-connect it with our own innate goodness and innate worth and worthiness and, and doing that work. And at the same time, it allows us to focus our energy, uh, where we really have the most personal power. And the most influence, which is with ourselves.

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So, it's not only, uh, looking, you know, I ask people, an... and when I, when I train people in the model, it's very experiential and I've tried to duplicate that in the book as best I can. But, it's all, it's all done experientially through processes that I lead people through. And, where we get, get into these distinctions that become absolutely clear what's in the body, heart, and mind.

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And so, um, it's, it's really seeing that, um, on, on the one hand, yes, we can look at where am I complicit, right, in some of the circumstances. And that can be helpful. And the only reason to see where I'm complicit, or where I even completely created something, is, is not to blame myself. But now that gives me the insight on how I can do things differently to get different results. So, when I see my part in a, the pathway to some circumstance, that gives me the opportunity to create different circumstance. So, it's only for the purpose of that. At the same time, radical responsibility is about owning circumstances

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that I can't see I had any complicity in.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Fleet Maull: Or anything to do with at all. And again, that's not to blame myself. It's because, it's just like, "Okay, this is in my lap now." You know. Maybe it shouldn't be in mine or anybody else. Maybe it's a horribly unjust situation, right. But maybe it s- seems like it fell out of the sky and landed on my head, or in my lap, and everyone would agree I had nothing to do with it. Well, the fact of the matter is, it's now in my lap. And the really salient question is what am I gonna do with it. Am I gonna let it take me down? Or am I gonna find the most creative way I can respond and move forward in my life, without blaming myself, but without getting lost in blaming others and cultivating a victim

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narrative. But just really looking at the situation. What's the most creative way I can respond to this situation to move forward in my life?

[00:22:00] And that's, that's where it gets to the really radical nub of this. Because, and it does require, uh, a mindfulness practice or a contemplative practice. And it does require doing the work of cultivating self-compassion and loving-kindness for oneself, to give one the courage and the, and the strength to do this. But it's, that's what really makes us even more radical than some other models that really would want to parse out because of the fear of self-blame. Because we're all so enculturated to go into this self-blame and self-shaming.

[00:22:30] And, and, in some ways, part of what this is looking at is, is just really the efficient use of our available, uh, time, energy, courage, insight, you know, physical strengths, mental strengths, spiritual strength, and focusing it where we can do the most good. Which is, what can I do? How can I respond to this? Or for a team, how can we respond to this?

Jerry:
[00:23:00] Th- th- this reminds me, um, in so many ways, I, I, you know, so many of the populations that you're dealing with, in addition to, uh, the work you do in, in criminal justice system, the work you do, um, with those who are all sides of that suffering. Um, uh, you know, I know from our other conversation that, that you work with, for example, um, not just prisoners in, in the prison mindfulness work that you're doing, but also with the, with the folks who are responsible for keeping them, keeping folks safe. And, and, uh, maintaining the container of that, uh, criminal justice system.
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[00:24:00] And so you're in th... all these different places. And, you know, in a, in a, in a less, uh, prosaic way, um, I think that this, what you're saying here is really important, even for the, um, you know, our listeners, who are, in many cases, first time leaders, entrepreneurs, people who, um, who had that very same human proclivity to experience pain and to go to blame or shame or self-blame, um, and, and, and get stuck in this space of that. And, um, I remember, uh, once reading, and this may be our relationship and our, our love of some of its end teachings. As an aphorism, which I bastardized into, this being so, so what. Meaning this being the conditions of your life, what will you do about it?
[00:24:30]

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Right? And there's something very powerful about being able to sit with strength in a warrior stance and being able to say, "This is my life. And I, with discernment, understand the ways in which I have contributed and that all of the conditions that have unfolded." And now, what shall you do with this?

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Does that resonate with you?

[00:25:00]

Fleet Maull:

Absolutely. You know there's a, for me there's a, a very integrated mix of vulnerability and courage. Um, and, and, you know, when I go into prisons, I want the prisoners to get two things. And they do get it because it's who I am. Um, I want them to get that I know the vast majority of them come from hellish backgrounds. That they were pretty much programmed to end up in prison. Many of them are lucky they're alive. That our criminal justice system is in- incredibly unjust and in- incredibly raciously, racially unjust, whether by default or design. But I, I want 'em to get that I get all that. And that most of them have been terribly victimized in their lives. I want 'em to get all that and that I, that I, that I, that it breaks my heart to see people in prison. It breaks my heart to see and know about their lives and where they are and their suffering and where it's led them to. I want 'em to really get that.

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At the same time, I want them to get that, if they want something different in their life, um, if they want to make a difference for others, if they want to make a difference even just for themselves, the only way out for them is to start taking ownership for each and every decision they're making right now. And, you know, they can sit around and, and bemoan all the causes and conditions that led to them ending up in that prison cell. It's not gonna do them a damn bit of good, you know. It's, it's really having the courage to open up to the pain of being in prison to begin with, which most prisoners really ward off, right.

Jerry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:26:30]

Fleet Maull:

They ward off. They take this cavalier attitude and a lot of black humor and, you know, to really embrace the pain of being, you know, in a prison cell and what that means, the social depth that's involved with that. And, uh, th... you know, the family, uh relationships, and all the rest and to really embrace that pain and then say I'm gonna sit in this pain and start owning the decisions I'm making. And, and, and from that place of brokenhearted warriorship, which is a term that you use, start moving forward in my life. And th- that's the only pathway forward for them.

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And, you know, I give the same message to CEOs. You know, in leadership, we carry a higher burden. We carry a higher burden. And the people we're leading, and the, the people who, uh, you know, really depend on us to show up and be real and be authentic and be genuine, don't have time for us to be parsing out responsibility. And, uh, you know, and, you know, well, you know, it's yeah, I, I, I know as a leader, um, I got to take this owner, but, you know, so and so in this department, and that, and my employees, and this, and the economy, and the government, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, you know. It's just a complete, absolute waste of time. And it doesn't mean that we may not

find ourselves doing that. And then breathe with that and surround that with loving-kindness and compassion.

[00:28:00] And, and by... and experience the times when our fear triggers old wounds and triggers our childhood experiences of shaming. That we can surround that with awareness and love and compassion. And then we gotta, uh, you know, we gotta stand up straight and, and feel that. Be willing to, within that space of vulnerability, start moving forward and take complete ownership for the steps we're taking and complete-

Jerry: What I hear you saying-

Fleet Maull: ... ownership for our responsibility.

Jerry: ... we have to stay and face it.

[00:28:30] Fleet Maull: Yeah, absolutely. My teacher used a term holding your seat. Which comes from the equestrian tradition called dressage. Where, instead of posting at a, at a trot, canter, or a gallop, you keep your butt in the saddle. The body, your body never loses contact with the horse and you have to, your whole pelvis moves in a different way. And, when you're in the ring training with a trainer in dressage, that trainer may be yelling at you, "Hold your seat, hold your seat." And he was trained in that tradition. His wife was a dressage master and still is and, and so he used that expression, which is a great parallel to meditation because you're putting your butt on the cushion, right? So, but, you know, for him, training in meditation was training to hold our seat in the midst of our life.

[00:29:00] Jerry: So holding our seat and, and, and the way I often sh... uh, say that, is taking the seat. Which, um-

Fleet Maull: To begin with, that's the first step, yeah [crosstalk 00:29:06].

[00:29:30] Jerry: ... to begin with, that's the first seat, right. I- it is a function of staying and facing it. And it's a functi... it's, it's the advice that you are, it's the counsel. Advice is too distant a word. It's the counsel. It's the way in which you are being with, uh, the prisoners who are in a system. And, perhaps, the prisoners who have shame and blame, who are outside of a constrained system. And I don't mean to create a false equivalency between the experiences of those who are in a dehumanizing cell. In a racist, um, uh, dehumanizing experience known as a cellblock. But, and, and those of us who are feeling trapped by our work lives and by our lives, but there is a, uh, relationship [crosstalk 00:29:55]-

Fleet Maull: Absolutely.

Jerry: ... the, the suffering. And that dukkha suffering, is suffering.

[00:30:00]

Fleet Maull: And it's standing in that. Standing in the hot fire of that. What in the Indian traditions o- of, of, India, both Tibetan and Hinduism, they use the term charnel ground.

Jerry: Right.

Fleet Maull: Uh, Pema Chodron talks about places that scare you. It's sitting in the hot fire of that, that burns away what is unnecessary and what's left is a natural radiation of the human heart and our innate goodness and that's really what we have to offer to others. As leaders. Uh, as people going into support prisoners. People running companies. Uh, our spouses. Our children. What we have to offer is, you know, the extent that we're, we've done and we're doing our work, so that is not in the way of our open heart and our authenticity and our genuineness. And there's a net, there's a real radiation.

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You know, I spent, in, in prison, I helped start the first hospice program inside a prison anywhere. I happened to do my time in a maximum security federal prison hospital in the height of the AIDS epidemic, so we started a hospice program and then I started an organization, and there's now about 80 hospices in state and federal prisons now and, and-

Jerry: Can, can we just pause on that. Cause, again, you just said something really powerful. My dear Dharma brother, you are, uh, your heart is really powerful. You created the first hospice program in the midst of the AIDS crisis. In the midst of a population that our society has basically thrown away. Where you said, "Those who are dying, still deserve dignity." That is incredible. And, and, I interrupted you and I apologize for that-

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Fleet Maull: No, no problem.

Jerry: ... but I needed to honor-

[00:32:00]

Fleet Maull: Yeah.

Jerry: ... what, what, what you had just said.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And for me, what that work was all about was what I had to bring to the bedside of one of my fellow prisoners, was who I was being. And to the extent that I was sitting in that fire of my own work, and, uh, there's a, there's a palpable radiation that, a space, in which, uh, is very, can be very healing for others, but it's [inaudible 00:32:30] very stabilizing in which they can find their own seat and begin to hold their own seat and do their own work. So I think it's that natural space holding and radiation. I mean there's lots of skillful things we can do. And in the hospice work, we learn to be skillful

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and conversationally and skillful in how to care for somebody physically. But the, the, and the same thing with leadership. There's all kinds of leadership skills and communication skills, coaching skills, things that we can learn.

[00:33:00] But, for me, the ground is who we're being. And that comes out of the work that we do. And that we're continually willing to, uh, peel back another layer and another layer of that unacknowledged shame and drop into our vulnerability, you know. Uh, I, one place I learned this in prison, was in the 12-step work. I immediately got involved in that kind of recovery work to deal with my own substance abuse issues. And, you know, it was a combination of an Alcoholics Anonymous and a Narcotics Anonymous group. And in the big book of AA, which because of the era in which it was founded, the language is fairly theistic and Christian. I have nothing against those traditions, but it wasn't my tradition. So I was struggling with that language a bit as a Buddhist. And, for awhile, even the notion of higher power.

[00:34:00] And then one day I, I had this, uh, pretty profound insight, that I realized that my higher power was that hole in my gut. That I had been trying to fill up with anything possible my whole life, coming out of the shame I experienced. You know, I grew up in a good middle class family in the Midwest that became, uh, somewhat upper middle class. Uh, but, self-made family on both sides of my family. Good people, but alcoholism and, uh, this secret life of my mother's, um, periodic alcoholism and ragealism, and, uh, the kind of Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde mother that I grew up with went from being this beatific, creative, artistic, uh, woman, uh, uh, once or twice a week, or two or three times a month, turned into this scary alcoholic, rageaholic and would come take her anger out on me or whoever was around. And so growing up with the shame of that, right.

[00:35:00] And, and, so I lived with a black hole in my gut and had been trying to fill that up with sex and drugs and experiences and everything you could think of. And I feel... I finally realized that hole in my gut was my higher power. That's where I needed to go. That's where I would find my higher power. And that really is what made that 12-step work incredibly transformative for me. And synced in with all the meditation practices and inner yoga practices I was doing from the Tibetan tradition.

[00:35:30] Um, but I was able, really, to just take my seat, in that, um, very dark, scary world of shame and pain and grief and vulnerability and learn to be a yogi there, learn to live there. That that's, that that's, um, that there's something there that you can trust and it opens the doorway to a deeper level of being, um, where, where things become unshakeable. And um-

Jerry: I'm, I'm reminded of, uh, one of my favorite Joseph Campbell quotes, which is "The treasure you seek is in the back of the cave."

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And when I'm hearing you say, you know, you, you say your higher power, I often say your super power.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: [00:36:00] Right? And, and what I'm hearing is that, uh, by the good grace of the federal prison system, you had nothing, no choice but to actually go back to the back of the cave.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: And really face these things. And, and you did what your teacher told you to do. You stayed and faced it. And, and, you know, I wanna thank you for th... for, for, for, for this cau... because I think that what you're giving us, is not only an intellectual understanding of what you mean by radical responsibility, but in an emotional, existential, and spiritual understanding.

[00:36:30]
Fleet Maull: Mm- hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Grounded in the viceralness of your true experience. And I'm gonna jump us to something you shared with me before we started recording, which was that you were recently on the border.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Between the United States and Mexico. And working, not just with, well, why don't you tell that story. You were working with who?

Fleet Maull: [00:37:00] Yeah. As I mentioned before, I've been bringing this work to prisoners for 30 years, but, gratefully, for the last 10 years. I've had the opportunity to bring it to criminal justice and public safety professionals. Correctional officers to begin with and it's expanded from there. And I was contacted a couple of months ago by the U.S. Border Patrol, um, the El Centro sector in, uh, in California, on the border that covers part of Arizona, part of California.

[00:37:30] And, um, they have a thousand agents there and, uh, you know, they're doing a really tough job and they're being asked to do things that many of us feel are very inhumane under current policies, as we all know, it's been in the news a lot. And, um, they, like most, uh, law enforcement agencies, they have, uh, agents who are, have regular positions, uh, but they're also part of a peer support team that support other officers when there's been a critical incident, or traumatic incident, or when they're having trouble in their personal life... I mean, they try to. There's a really kind of a macho culture and it's very hard to get people even to reach out for help. But that's their job, is to support their fellow officers.

[00:38:00] So they wanted us to come down and, and give them some training around resilience and wellness. And, uh, so we went down there, and out in the middle of the desert, it was 118 degrees the day we were there. I had never been in that kind of heat. And I didn't know what to run into, although I work a lot with police and law enforcement these days, so I kind of know the culture a bit, and very familiar with, with it. And so, you know, it was, there were kind of typical law enforcement and, uh, got in there and they were all, most all of them were, uh, armed. And some were in uniform. Some weren't in uniform. It's a, it's been an experience over the last eight years to stand up in front of a room full, with anywhere from 20 to 100 officers looking back at me and they're al... they're all armed (laughing) and I, uh, sometimes, I don't do it all the time anymore, but very often started off explaining, you know, where I come from and the fact that I'm, you know, a graduate of one of their programs.

Jerry: (laughs),

Fleet Maull: And, uh, yo- you're just digging yourself in a hole, you know. Uh, but anyway, there I was with these officers. And before we started, we had a conversation with the, he wasn't in the training, but he was the agent who organized it and, and brought us in. And, you know, we were talking about some of the stuff that's in the news. And he talked about, and, you know, something he experienced, where he had to separate a mother from her children and how absolutely heartbreaking and traumatizing it was for him and, and that he's never really gotten over it. And, actually in that instance, it was a mother, who was actually engaged in criminal activity. There was drug smuggling involved. And, and she had the children with her as kind of a cover. So, it wasn't just the immigration or someone seeking asylum, but it still broke his heart. It was still incredibly traumatic for him.

[00:39:30] And, um, you know, we had side conversations with other, uh, agents during the breaks, and so forth. And, and some of them were willing to talk about, you know, what they're going through and how they, how they feel they're being perceived by the media and, and the work they're having to do and, and the, what it's costing them. And there were some others who were more armored up with bravado and, and making light of it or kind of some black humor and so forth.

[00:40:00] But, overall, as we got in to the training, um, you know, people were just soaking it up like a sponge because they're in so much pain. And, you know, even though they, they're not inclined to admit it or be open and vulnerable about it, you know, because of the way I lead the training and who I'm being in the training room, they just start, they just start seeing, oh, oh my God, you know.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Fleet Maull: And, uh, and I'm, and, um, it's very practical training. I'm, I'm, everything is oriented. Everything about the training. I mean, it's a combination about mindfulness, emotional intelligence work, uh, resilience work. It has a neuro-biological foundation, a science foundation. But, everything is oriented towards, uh, giving them tools to get in, more in the driver's seat of their own life, uh, with self-compassion. And, and to real... you know, be able to actually be alive in their own body and their own heart. To not be shut down. And, have the skills to really, you know, not be victimized by the situation they're in, but really start, you know... And, uh, and they just soak it up.

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And, and this training, for some reason, I, uh, everyone's different, but I got through the rhythm both days and, especially the second day, where I was able to go into the radical responsibility piece... I can't go through the whole process in that short of a training. But I walked 'em through the way I do the process.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Fleet Maull: You know, I said, you know, usually we pair people up and then they're telling, I have 'em go deep into a victim story, and surface all the things that come up in terms of the themes of injustice and betrayal and abuse of power, and all the feelings of rage and anger and hurt and shame. And we get all that up there. And then I shift and have them tell the ownership version of the story, what I call the ownership version of the story. Like what can you own in this? And what can you see where, and people retell the story from a different perspective.

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And we get a whole different set of themes of and feelings. And it's not that, uh, the other one's a rose garden, but it's very different. And I have that one above this line and that one below this line and we start looking at it. And we get to this distinction around that you can actually live you, it's a choice where you want to live vis a vis the circumstances of our life. And it may be a hard one choice and it may be a heroic choice, but there is choice. And this is not about, and, you know, imposing that choice on others. Telling others. This is about us, right? But seeing that we have that choice, and to exercising that choice is our way into authentic relationship. And really what everything that we value in life.

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And they were just, I, I don't think I'd ever seen a group of law enforcement officers who their eyes were all wide open. And they were just soaking it in. It was like the last hour of the training. And they were just, their jaws dropping, soaking it in, because they just saw that, that they didn't have to stay stuck in the incredible pain they're in and there was another alternative to just shutting down and armoring up and being and angry and being negative. That, that they could, that there was a way forward to be a human being, even in the midst of this really challenging work that they do. And, um-

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Jerry: All right-

Fleet Maull: ... so that was powerful to be with them and to see that, the lights, you know, going on in their eyes.

Jerry: It, it's powerful to just hear the story. And, you know, what it, what it leads me to wish, and I imagine this is so... that one or more of those officers, then is able to approach their work, which is important work, with what the wish we, so many of us have for them.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

[00:43:30]
Jerry: Which is that they do so with compassion.

Fleet Maull: Absolutely, yeah.

Jerry: That they then respond to that person, who in their desperation, with or without illegal activity, their desperation, their, because even those who are smuggling drugs are trying to change the circumstances of their life.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative), absolutely.

Jerry: Perhaps with poor choices, eh?

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Right? But their, but, but to approach, because they have power, what I see you having done is encourage a level of self-empathy, self-awareness, so that they can then approach their very important discharge of power and responsibility with compassion.

[00:44:00]
Fleet Maull: Yeah, absolutely. And we're all hardwired for compassion. And we're hardwired for altruism. And when, um, when our own fear and our own shame gets in the way, we're not able to access that. And so, if, if we can give people the skills to take better care of themselves, um, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and, and have more sense of self-agency and competence in how they can navigate, you know, their own body, heart, and mind, and get in touch with something deeper, then they can access their very natural capacities for compassion and altruism.

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You know, I had a running experiment in prison. I can't remember if I tell this story in the book. But when I was in prison, I was born in Missouri, the Show Me State, I'm the natural skeptic and had a great rational skeptic education growing up. Um, and through high school and college, and uh, so, you know, I'm the classic doubting Thomas, right? So even though I've been immersed in the teachings around basic goodness for, you know, for 45 years now, and

inclined that way even before then, uh, you know, it was still in my mind, you know, maybe not everybody, you know.

[00:45:30] And so there were a lot of, uh, people among my fellow prisoners and the guards in this prison where I was, uh, that made you wonder. (laughs). You know? And so I had this kind of running experiment, you know, of, uh, of, you know, people who may- maybe they, you know, it was questionable whether they had any redeeming value or any capacity for goodness at all. And so I was, you know, kind of informally tracking, because I was there for a long time. Um, and, uh, every time I thought I had my man, you know, uh, it was usually the male guards and sometimes a prisoner. Um, at that point where I almost was convinced that they had no redeeming value, or no capacity, they would always reveal their heart to me. It happened every time. And I finally gave up the project.

[00:46:30] But some of the mos... some of, some of those bitter, angry guards that you never got anything but hate and venom from, and it could be incredibly demeaning, you know, suddenly I saw their heart and saw their vulnerability. There was one guard I'll never forget, who was just, you know, you just never got anything but absolute nastiness and, you know, from him. And obviously a really angry and really hurt person. But when you're on the other side of that power dynamic, it's hard to have compassion when somebody's coming at you that's that level of negativity and, and, you know, just really demeaning energy. And, uh, so, you know, I was pretty used to, you know, keeping my distance, uh, and, and both, both physically (laughs) and emotionally around his energy. And one day, um, I'm coming by him, and they, they move around a lot in the prison. They move around in their duty assignments a lot. And so, he had been in the visiting room one time when I was there on a visit with my son. And, uh, so I'm walking by the guard station and he looks up at me and he says, "How's your son?"

Jerry: Ahhhhhh.

Fleet Maull: Yeah.

Jerry: Now you're gonna make me cry.

Fleet Maull: Yeah.

[00:47:30]
Jerry: Yeah. Yeah. The power of your son to actually connect the two of you.

Fleet Maull: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerry: Well, Fleet, thank you for that story and thank you for, for the conversation this morning. And thank you for your book. Um, it's an effort, um, and, you know, for me, the book is a, uh, concise workbook, if you will, for how to be

[00:48:00] more human. Um, it's not a bit... merely about moving beyond blame and shame. It's really about, um, kind of a, a stepping through, um, the movement towards adulthood. And we joked before, you joked before, that the subtitle of my book *Leadership and the Art of Growing Up* could've been yours. I would suggest that it's more leadership and the art of being human. Um, uh, is, is the subtitle here. And you, you do a wonderful job of just breaking things down and making it accessible and understandable. And I can feel the effort. I can feel 30, 40 years of training coming through the book. And so, thank you for that. Uh...

[00:48:30]

Fleet Maull: Thank you. Thank you very much, Jerry.

Jerry: It was a delight to have you on the show.

Fleet Maull: Yeah. Been a delight to be with you.

Jerry: Mm-hmm (affirmative).