

The Daily Helping Episode 307:

Marc Lesser

Marc Lesser: [00:00:00] Would you like me to just listen? Or would you like me to problem solve? Sometimes, we just need a good listening too.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:00:16] Hello and welcome to The Daily Helping with Dr. Richard Shuster, food for the brain, knowledge from the experts, tools to win at life.

I'm your host, Dr. Richard. Whoever you are, wherever you're from and whatever you do, this is the show that is going to help you become the best version of yourself. Each episode you will hear from some of the most amazing, talented and successful people on the planet who followed their passions and strive to help others. Join our movement, to get a million people each day to commit acts of kindness for others. Together, we're going to make the world a better place. Are you ready? Because it's time for your daily helping.

Thanks for tuning into this episode of The Daily Helping podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Richard. And I am so excited to share our guest with you today. You are absolutely going to love his wisdom and his energy.

His name is Marc Lesser. He's a speaker, facilitator, workshop leader, and executive coach. He is the author of four books, including Seven Practices of a Mindful Leader, Lessons from Google and a Zen Monastery Kitchen, and CEO of ZBA Associates, an executive development and leadership consulting company.

He has helped develop the world-renowned Search Inside Yourself program within Google and was director of the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the oldest Zen Monastery in the Western world.

He is here with us today to talk about his new book, which is available everywhere, Finding Clarity, How Compassionate Accountability Builds Vibrant Relationships, Thriving Workplaces and Meaningful Lives.

Marc, welcome to The Daily Helping. It is awesome to have you with us today.

Marc Lesser: [00:02:05] Dr. Richard, it's a pleasure to be here with you.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:02:07] I am so excited about this show. We were chatting a little bit before. And I just knew this was going to be a dynamite discussion. So let's hop in the Marc Lesser time machine first and foremost. Let's go back in time. Tell us your superhero origin story. How did you get put on the path you're on today?

Marc Lesser: [00:02:28] You know, there's a variety of origin stories. One is it all started when I was a freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey, minding my own business. But I was pretty -- I think of myself as having been pretty asleep as a kid. But finding myself at college and reading a book called *Tortoise Psychology of Being* by Abraham Maslow and that did it, or at least that and a few other things.

But that book in particular by Maslow was about a study that he did about what it was -- that there is a small slice of the population that seem to be highly evolved, more in tune with their emotions, felt greater sense of joy and grief. And we're just living their lives at a higher level.

And I got -- this was not me and that I was way over on the other end of the spectrum. But that was something like why wouldn't everyone want to be devoting their lives to be more evolved, more awake, more human? And there was some kind of deep inner resetting for me, and I ended up taking a one-year leave of absence from Rutgers. And that one year turned out to be ten years living at the San Francisco Zen Center.

You might imagine my parents were not thrilled about that. But that really, I feel like that ten years laid the foundation for my life. And one other thing that was a surprise during that time was how important work was and that I kept being asked to take on leadership roles within the Zen Center, which really surprised me.

But again, I was like, wow, these meditation practice, mindfulness practice, awareness, practice and leadership, again, why isn't everyone doing this? It just made so much sense to me. And I ended up going to business school, starting and running a publishing company. And then a few years later finding myself in front of Google engineers, teaching mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and leadership.

And still, I feel like in some way, I think, Dr. Richard, that we're all businesspeople, and we're all Zen students in that we all need to pay the bills and make a living and take

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care of our day to day lives. And we all have to contend with life and death. And the fact that we are literally here for a relatively short amount of time and how we can recognize that and use that to be more passionate and awake about everything that we do.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:05:42] I want to dive deeper into that, but I want to circle back to your time working with Google, the engineers, because I've been in the software world. I know what software engineers generally are like, right? They are very left brained. They are very logic centered, right? Like that's the mindset of an engineer. And you're teaching something that's so much the polar opposite of that. Talk about what that experience working with Google was like just for a little bit and then I want to dive deeper in your other stuff.

Marc Lesser: [00:06:15] Yeah. Well, it's interesting. At the beginning, this is now different because the world has changed. But back then, this goes back 10, 15 years ago when we started. We had to start with the science of meditation. So we had to appeal to the left brain, to the scientific brain.

But as soon as they saw that, oh, there is some pretty interesting science about the benefits of meditation and mindfulness practice, we could very easily go into what I think of as creating a safe space, a space where they didn't have to be so anxious and competitive. And in fact, they used to use the language that in our trainings they could take off their game faces.

And just the combination of creating a safe space and doing some listening practice, so one of the things we would do is get with a partner and for three minutes, have one person speak and have the other person just listen. And it was like we were giving them some magic potion because they had never realized how rarely they actually listened and how rarely they could speak and feel like they were being heard.

And this program that we introduced into Google kind of became massively successful and skilled everyone. The word spread about you could come and practice listening to your own thoughts and feelings, and you could practice listening to another person. And there's science to back it all up. So I loved it. And it also really, I didn't realize how much I loved teaching and how much I loved being up in front of the room working with these groups. And so it transformed my life in that way.

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Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:08:24] Beautifully said. I'd like to ask you as well. This book that you just released, Finding Clarity, what was the impetus for writing that book?

Marc Lesser: [00:08:35] Yeah. I found -- one of the things that I do, I think of it as my day job right now. You know, people ask me what I do, and I say, well, I think I start and grow companies, which I've done three different times. But in between, I do coaching and consulting. And at the moment, these last several years I've been in between.

And one of my main clients is a large, successful, socially responsible bank. And somehow working with them, I introduced the language of compassionate accountability. And they completely have adopted that as the kind of culture that they want to create a culture that is highly accountable, where there is tremendous amount of clarity, openness, effectiveness, and at the same time a culture that is high in care and trust and compassion.

And through that work, I started developing more and more programs, exercises. And out of that, I thought there's a book here. And that's where the book Finding Clarity, which is really about compassionate accountability, was born.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:09:58] I love this. So let's dive right in. The first obvious question is how would you define, I mean you created the term, right? So how do you define compassionate accountability?

Marc Lesser: [00:10:10] Yeah. Well, it's interesting. I'd start, really the focus is really on accountability, which is interesting because when people -- that word has a bad reputation. People don't like -- accountability sounds cold or like I'm going to be held accountable or a lack of accountability. But accountability is really about -- the word that I like better in a way than accountability is alignment.

So holding oneself accountable is being aligned with in what way are your deepest values and the way that you want to be showing up and living in the world, living and working in the world, in all of your relationships, how aligned are you? Are you holding yourself accountable?

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And then a lot of accountability is about relationship and having healthy relationships. Like what does -- like in the workplace, are we clear about what success looks like? And it's amazing how this is such an obvious question, but one that is overlooked again and again.

Are we clear about what it is we're trying to accomplish? And are we clear about how we're working together, what the underlying assumptions are about how we are dealing with things like conflict, how we're dealing with, you know, again, even things like celebration and success and all of those kind of cultural factors.

So it's interesting. You can see why the book is called Finding Clarity, because so much of it is about driving toward clarity in how we show up and in all our relationships at work and at home.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:12:01] Yeah. I was going to say, as you were describing compassionate accountability, and I find it fascinating because I've never heard anyone frame accountability in the term of alignment, but it's very clear that this is a way of being accountable in a compassionate manner.

And it's a way of being that you could have with your significant other. It's a way of being you could have with your children. It's a way of being with your clients, with your partners, with your employees, with your coworkers. Like it really is not just a workplace thing, this is an across-the-board thing.

Marc Lesser: [00:12:41] Yeah. Yeah. And I'm a big fan, Dr. Richard, of this phrase way of being. So even going back to -- like what I discovered is that standing up in front of those Google engineers, the way of being that I was teaching was that I wasn't there to prop up my own ego. I didn't even have to be the expert. I could tell them when they asked me scientific questions, I don't know, I'll have to look that up.

Part of the way of being too there was not avoiding pain and difficulty, not avoiding conflict. And this, I think, turns out, I think one of the most important parts of accountability because we humans, nobody likes conflict. Nobody you know, we don't like it and but avoiding it and pretending it isn't there is trouble.

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And being able to skillfully work with conflict is part way of being And part having the skills and tools to be able to skillfully maneuver in those waters of disagreement. And disagreement and conflict can be super healthy when we're not avoiding them when we're working, working more skillfully and effectively with it.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:14:12] But you've said a couple of times that you've built some exercises, you've created some tools. So people listening to this are probably nodding along and they're like, yep, I want to find some clarity. I want to get on my journey to have this way of being of compassionate accountability. Give us some practical tips or strategies that people, if they're starting from baseline, can use here to start really uncovering some of these things about themselves and how to have that way of being.

Marc Lesser: [00:14:43] Yeah. Well, it's interesting. The titles of the first three chapters of the book, the first is Be Curious, Not Furious. The second is Drop the Story. And the third is Listen for Understanding. So I think these all sound -- you know, people have heard these There's nothing unusual about any of these words. But as a way of being practices, I think they are phenomenally important, simple and profound.

So Be Curious, Not Furious, right. So noticing how often we get triggered and it's feeling scanning for threats is something we humans do to stay alive. It was a Google scientist friend of mine was fond of saying that we human beings, you know, that the ones who were -- the ones who were chill and calm, they all got killed as we've evolved over millennium. It was the ones who were really good at scanning for threats. And that we're highly evolved to look for the negative, to look for danger externally and also internally. Right.

We are our own inner voice. Our own inner critic is always trying to keep us safe by looking at, you know, are we doing anything wrong? Am I okay? And and this is all, you know, important but can be problematic. So the practice is to be curious about whatever is happening in us, to notice our own discomfort, to notice all of our feelings, and to really, really lean into a sense of a curiosity.

And at the same time, this is a way of not getting too caught about our stories, especially our mistaken beliefs about ourselves and especially our limiting beliefs about

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ourselves. I really appreciated in our -- as you and I were talking about you describing the entrepreneurial things that you're doing in the world and all of the ways that you've learned from some of the especially the kind of life threatening events that you've had in your past and how that has brought you, I think to not be so caught by your story and by your mistaken beliefs. And you seem to be particularly curious human being yourself.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:17:27] I appreciate that. I want to ask you a follow up question, because it's very interesting. You mentioned about our ability to be scanning for threats. You also mentioned the things that trigger us. So on one side of the coin, what I'm hearing you describe curiosity, it sounds a lot like what people teach about mindfulness.

But the other thing that I'm curious about is we're in a place societally, especially in a post-COVID world, where mental health illness rates and in particular anxiety, depression have absolutely skyrocketed. Right. And so how do we reconcile the scanning for threats and being triggered with curiosity? Because a lot of people have, whether they know it or not, have actually conditioned themselves to be triggered.

And this is not a political statement. This is science based because all of us have surrounded ourselves with technology that puts information in front of us 24 hours a day, essentially. For as long as we're awake and as long as we have a phone, whether it's on social media platform or push notifications, something in our environment for most people is giving them something that may trigger them. So how do we embrace this curiosity while not kind of overloading ourselves with these negative things that can cause us emotional distress?

Marc Lesser: [00:19:01] Yeah. Well, I have a strong both bias and experience, and I think there's a lot of science to back this up, the importance of actually having a meditation practice that man, it's tough out there, right, as you're saying, with the how technology has influenced our lives, the pace of our lives combined with this evolutionary scanning for threats. You put all these together and we're seeing, right, the statistics about mental health, depression, addiction, our trauma are staggering.

And I think having some way to step outside of the stream of busyness and intensity. This is, I think, the power, the possibility of meditation practice or for some people, it

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could be journal writing or it could be spending time in nature. It doesn't have to be sitting. You don't have to be sitting cross-legged. You can sit in a chair. But having some way of training the mind to be able to not be caught by the busyness and getting busier and busier.

And then I think it's the aspiration and the practice of bringing that way of being into your daily life. So it's not about being engaged and doing a lot of things. That's not the problem. The problem is the state of mind and the approach that we bring into those things. So that's, to me, the beauty, the possibility.

So it's interesting this not avoiding the pains, not avoiding the stresses of life, but finding being curious. This is, I think, the like coming back and creating a little bit of space in our day, a little bit of space in our, you know, so that we're not caught again and again.

And when we are caught, you know, it's like one of the -- I've brought -- Homer Simpson plays a major role, actually in my book, Finding Clarity, because I think he's such a great example of exactly how we don't want to be in eminent lives. He's the -- I call him the accountability expert.

And as I was writing, you know, I was remembering what I think of one of his famous lines that he says throughout the series is why does everything have to be so hard? And I call that voice. That voice is like my own inner Homer or my own inner victim. And it gives me just a little bit of space to be able to laugh at myself and see that making things hard is something I have to take responsibility for.

Another great question is what if things were easy? What if things were easy? What if things were easier instead of making it hard?

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:22:04] I love that you brought Homer Simpson into this. So a thousand bonus points for that. We briefly touched on it, but I want to go a little deeper into Drop the Story. So talk to us about that and why that's so critical.

Marc Lesser: [00:22:23] Yeah. You know, another, you know, I talked about the how we've evolved to scan for threats. We've also evolved as great storytellers, right? Our brains are storytelling machines. And we live in the story. And a lot of it, of course, it

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starts with the story of me, right?

And everything that we do, everything that we think, all of the things that happen in our lives become part of our own story. I mean, things like -- an exercise I love to do with people is tell me your story from the point of view of failure. Tell me about all of the ways that you have not met your goals, how you've failed, really get into it.

But then, next, tell me the story of success. Tell me about all of the things that you've done that have been successful, that have gone well. And which is it? We all have many, many stories, but we it's easy to get caught by especially the story of failure or the story of stress or the story, you know, busyness is a really interesting story. And these days we often wear it like a badge of honor, you know, how are you doing today? Oh, I'm crazy busy, as though that's a good thing.

And part of it is the language that we use and the ways that we get caught by this ongoing story. You know, what if instead of busy you were trying on, well, I'm engaged, I'm spacious. The practice of spaciousness, I think, is really, really important these days to see finding a sense of spaciousness right in the midst of our very busy, engaging days.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:24:20] I love that reframe because how many times have we told people that, oh, I'm so busy. It's crazy. It's crazy over here. Right. And that is maladaptive. That's bad. So I very much appreciate the way you were able to give us that perspective. And I want to clarify, too, about that exercise, because I hope that people do this when they turn this episode off because it's such an interesting thing to do.

So effectively, you take people through this exercise where they -- are they journaling all of the successes and failures in their personal lives and their professional lives and whatever area they want? Like how do you really guide people as best to do that exercise?

Marc Lesser: [00:25:05] Yeah, there's a few different ways to do it. One is just to simply journal with the prompt success in my life looks like and then just write or failure in my life looks like. Another way that I do it, which is interesting, is to do a timeline. So to get

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a piece of paper and start with the year you were born and like every 5 or 10 years, put the year across the bottom of a page, and then you can put little points as to the lowlights, the difficult things on that page. And then above it, you can put the highlights, the things that have gone well and just kind of as a way of mapping out and looking at the high points and low points of your life.

And what people notice when you do this is that really the low points, the difficult things in a way have turn out to also be the high points because we learn so much even from those really difficult things. The losses, whether it's the divorces, the deaths. Yes, those things are immensely painful and difficult. Or you talked about in your background the issue you had with your spine as a young person and how that has brought you alive in ways today.

So it's interesting, the pain and possibility. I think there's something about really leaning into pain and difficulty and loss and at the same time really leaning into possibility and joy and celebration. And again, there's something about I think often a lot of us think that we need to be in this kind of middle ground where we're not fully feeling, where we're not fully open to the pains and possibilities of our lives.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:27:07] Beautifully said, Marc. I think this chapter, Listen for Understanding is so important in a world where we are often so divided. So take us into a deep dive into this chapter.

Marc Lesser: [00:27:24] Yeah. I think that the -- again, we hear things like listen and understanding and it's like, yeah, yeah, I do that. But no, it's like, just stop and reflect on the power of really listening and the power of actually listening for understanding. As I said earlier, in these three-minute exercises that we did with Google engineers.

And now -- it's funny, my son says that what I do for a living is I get people into pairs and have them listen to each other. And it's like, yeah, that is a big part of what I do. There's something about not just -- I mean, it's interesting in these workshops, it's practicing listening.

One of the things that I'm thinking of is, you know, when I do a two-day workshop, at the end of day one, I will say to people, when you go home tonight and your partner comes

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to you with some problem or issues or they're stressed, try just listening instead of going right into problem solving.

And invariably on day two, people come back, especially men, but sometimes women also say, my partner said, what happened to you? Were you taken over by some alien just because we get into the habit of not listening of problem solving. We get into the habit of kind of this fight or flight mode where we're either moving in or backing away.

Listening is a kind of creating a neutral ground, creating a very intentional ground where we can just be -- again, it's a radical kind of curiosity. Would you like me to just listen? Or would you like me to problem solve? Sometimes we just need a good listening too.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:29:30] I love it. Marc, this interview has been so fantastic. I knew that it would be. As you know, I like to wrap up every episode by asking my guests a single question, and I can't wait to hear your answer. That question is what is your biggest helping, that one most important piece of information you'd like somebody to walk away with after hearing our conversation today?

Marc Lesser: [00:29:55] Yeah. I think that our -- you know, it's a little bit like that we're all business people, and we're all Zen students, which is another way of saying way of being is to live a very ordinary and effective life and at the same time realize that everything we do is also sacred.

I like the word sacred. There's actually some interesting science happening now about studying the importance of having a sacred experience. And again, sacred to me, I think is one way to think of it, is that to rise above and beyond, you know, the ordinary stories that we get caught in and to see from a much larger perspective the sense of acceptance, joy, beauty, right in the midst of the day-to-day world of paying the bills and taking care of our children and working. Bringing us to -- they're like two sides of the same coin, the ordinary and the sacred.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:31:10] I love it. Marc, this has been so fantastic. Tell us where people can learn more about you and get their hands on Finding Clarity, which is available everywhere now.

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Marc Lesser: [00:31:20] Yeah, they can learn about me, Marclesser.net. M-A-R-C-L-E-S-S-E-R.net. Lots of writing, guided meditations. And yeah, try and make my work as valuable and accessible as possible.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:31:36] Beautiful. And I presume we can get the book there as well. Yes?

Marc Lesser: [00:31:40] Yes, of course.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:31:41] Wonderful.

Marc Lesser: [00:31:42] And anywhere books are sold, Finding Clarity.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:31:46] Terrific. We will have, of course, everything Marc Lesser linked in the show notes at thedailyhelping.com. Marc, I have loved our conversation today. This has been such a treat. Thank you so much for coming on The Daily helping.

Marc Lesser: [00:31:59] Thank you, Dr. Richard. I appreciate it.

Dr. Richard Shuster: [00:32:01] Absolutely. And to each and every one of you who took time out of your day, thank you as well. If you like what you heard, if you found this illuminating, go to Apple Podcasts and give us a follow and leave us a five-star review because that is what helps other people find the show.

But most importantly, go out there today and do something nice for somebody else, even if you don't know who they are and post in your social media feeds using the hashtag #MyDailyHelping because the happiest people are those that help others.