



Radical Responsibility in Relationships

Guest: Dr Fleet Maull

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm really excited to be talking to my good friend Fleet Maull. And we're going to be talking about the role of radical responsibility, really taking ownership for ourselves, and for our staff, and the power of self-awareness in relationships.

To give you a little bit of Fleet's background, Fleet Maull, PhD is an author, meditation teacher, and social entrepreneur, who developed Neuro-Somatic Mindfulness, a deeply embodied, neuroscience informed approach to meditation that accelerates healing, integration, and awakening.

He founded Heart Mind Institute, Prison Mindfulness Institute, Psychedelic Assisted Therapy Global Summit, the Global Resilience Summit and co-founded Engaged Mindfulness Institute, and Expanded States of Consciousness World Summit.

I should say that Fleet has done, as you can see, a number of online events. I've been very grateful to be interviewed on some of them. He does excellent online conferences.

Dr Maull is a Zen Roshi, and a senior Dharma teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He is the author of *Radical Responsibility, How To Move Beyond Blame, Fearlessly Live Your Highest Purpose And Become An Unstoppable Force For Good*. And in this interview, we're going to explore some of the key themes in that book.

So Fleet welcome. We've had many of these conversations over recent years, and this time I'm super excited to get into toxic relationships together. Well, I'm not excited for you and I to get into a toxic relationship, but I'm excited for you and I to explore the area. So welcome.

Dr Fleet Maull

Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

I feel like a good place to start, your book, *Radical Responsibility*, that I also spot on the shelf behind you. One of the key pieces you talk about is the importance of self-awareness. And I guess I'm curious as to what self-awareness means to you, but particularly in this context of healing toxic relationships, why self-awareness is so important.

[00:02:29] Dr Fleet Maul

Absolutely. Just navigating our own subjective life, our thoughts and emotions, and all the rest of it is complicated enough. But the minute we're in the field of relationships, relationships can be very difficult, and at best they can be wonderful too. It's a source of our joy, and connection, and resilience in life, but it can also be a source of pain, and grief, and conflict, and drama, and so forth. It's very complex.

If we don't have some level of self-awareness, some way to get a clear gauge about what's going on with me, what's going on in the world, what's going on between me and others, it's like walking blindfolded through a minefield. We really need some kind of self-awareness practice and to describe, there's lots of ways to develop self-awareness, but just to use an analogy, before we develop some form of awareness practice, mindfulness practice. Often it might be a form of meditation, but there's lots of ways one can develop more self-awareness before that.

It's like we're in this river of sensate experience without a lot of awareness. We're just in it. We're lost in the content of life, all the sensory input of the five senses, thoughts, emotions, the whole thing of our life, the external world. We're in that. And we're in it in a fairly habitual, mechanical, reactive way without a lot of consciousness or awareness.

Now, it's not completely so, but to a degree it's so. A further analogy would be is a fish aware of the water, because in their world water is so ubiquitous to their experience, right? So for us, we're in that world and then through some form of mindfulness practice, awareness practice, self-reflection practice, we're able to climb out of the river, and sit on the bank and then observe the river.

And now we can see what's going on. We can see the currents, the eddies, the whirlpools, the hydrodynamics. We can see things floating by and we can observe it, learn from it, develop insights about it. But also from that place of the witness, the observer, the watcher, we can make choices. We can choose how I am going to respond to this. Rather than just being lost in a reactive, habitual, mechanical way of being in that soup of our experience.

And so we all have some level of self-awareness or we couldn't function. But it can be fairly minimal until we're introduced to some discipline, or practice through which we get more self-awareness. And that could happen in an intellectual way to begin with. It could happen through the study of philosophy. It could happen through all the different forms of meditation, body mind disciplines. It could happen through sports, could happen through therapy. It could happen in some business context.

I just heard they're coming out with an anniversary edition of *The Inner Game of Tennis* which for many people 50 years ago opened up the whole world. The inner game of life, right? And it became a great leadership book, because it just brought that whole notion of self-awareness to the fore.

So we need some way to get clearer data about what's going on with ourselves, what's going on with others we're interacting with. And so we can develop greater understanding, discernment and wisdom. And it really begins with having the awareness to get the data to begin with, and developing that capacity to not just be lost in our experience, but to actually witness it.

[00:06:17] Alex Howard

I guess one of the things that that awareness does is it also has the potential to empower us, right? Because otherwise what's happening is that the person we're in relationship with, does that and we feel this way, and therefore how we feel is their fault, as opposed to the recognition of our own patterns, responses, and so on. So I guess I'm curious as to your thoughts of how self-awareness can help us move away from feeling like we're the victim of what's happening.

Dr Fleet Maul

Absolutely, you're right. When we lack that self-awareness we find ourselves just living in a reactive state, whether we're aware of it or not. So other people do things, people who are in relationship do things, say things and we just react. And then sometimes our reactions create further reactions, and it spirals into conflict and drama of various kinds, and then we're suffering, and we don't feel like we really had anything to do with it. In a sense, we didn't, we did, and we didn't. The process of transformation is that we own that, actually it is our reactivity, and our habitual patterns, and our whole conditioning, all going back to child, and whatever that's setting us up for this.

But on the other hand, because we're not really that aware or conscious, we didn't really decide to get into that conflict. We just found ourselves in it. And therefore here I am suffering, and I just feel victimized, like how did this happen again? This always happens, you always do that. Or even I start beating myself up, I'm such a loser, I get in these terrible relationships, right? So we're either beating ourselves up or beating the other. So we're looking for someone to blame, and we feel completely disempowered, because we feel out of control, and we haven't developed.

Another thing that comes along with self-awareness is a capacity for self-regulation. And this is really key as well, the two go together very much. It's one thing to have self-awareness when we're calm, cool and collected, right, in a quiet setting, and so forth. But in the battle of life, in the midst of the relationships and so forth, to have that same self-awareness then requires a capacity for self-regulation, to regulate our own nervous system.

So having simple breath regulation tools, simple things like straw breathing, box breathing, or just taking a deep breath, just having a way to recognize, I'm getting emotionally triggered, I need to untrigger myself. I need to bring myself back down to a more reasonable physiological state, where I have access to the smart part of my brain and my good judgment. Because when I'm triggered, I'm in fight or flight, and it's just off to the races with reactivity. So I need the ability to self-regulate, because otherwise until we develop that capacity for self-regulation, our nervous system is being regulated by the world around us, by everybody but us.

So of course we feel victimized. We all live in this interface between our childhood conditioning, and for most of us that was a mixed bag at best, right? None of us come through childhood unscathed, and for some of us our childhoods were really rough. So we can have some pretty tangled conditioning in there, with a lot of trauma and attachment issues, and so forth, and that can set us up for a lot of challenges and difficulty in life. So we have that, and then we have the world around us.

And if we don't develop self-awareness and a capacity for self-regulation, we're just kind of in there getting shoved around in that interface between what's coming at us from the world, and

how our childhood conditioning is reacting to that. And so of course we feel victimized because we feel completely powerless.

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So the way to reclaim our power is through developing self-awareness, and then developing skills for self-regulation. So I have the ability, even when things get challenging, to take care of myself, to breathe, to release the fight or flight response of the reptilian brain, get back access to the rational part of my brain again and say, okay, what's going on here? And what are the best choices I can make in this situation for myself and others? Rather than just going into reactivity that's going to fuel the fire of drama, right?

I think it's that combination of self-awareness and self-regulation, and it is incredibly empowering. I do a lot of work with public safety professionals, correctional officers, probation, parole officers, police. And they have constant exposure to very high stress, and both primary and secondary trauma, and they live in fairly toxic worlds. They experience a lot of toxic things. Often even their peer culture is very toxic, because you have a whole lot of people immersed in a very high stress, or chronic stress, a world full of trauma.

They don't have the skills for self-regulation and self-awareness. What do they create with each other? They create drama and negativity. So we start training them in simple self-regulation skills, and it's mind-blowing for them. Oh my goodness, I have choice. They feel so empowered to be able to choose to walk away from something, or to take care of themselves in the midst of something, and reduce the amount of negative drama in their life. So you're right, it's incredibly empowering.

Alex Howard

It's also interesting because I imagine there'd be people that are watching this, or listening to this, and going, okay, well yes, I recognize self-awareness and self-regulation, but this other person keeps doing this, or keeps not doing that. And I think one can become quite identified with that narrative and story, that it's someone else's fault that they feel that way, and I wouldn't have to work on self-regulation if this person wasn't doing that. So in those instances, what helps someone shift in their sense of self-responsibility, or their sense of recognition of their role within that dynamic?

Dr Fleet Maul

Well, I think it's helpful to step back for a moment and look at the larger landscape of this. So we've all been deeply enculturated into the impulse to blame, and the need to blame basically when something happens. Anything problematic happens we've been enculturated to believe somebody has to be to blame, somebody's going to take the blame, somebody's at fault. Of course, we've all been blamed enough in our lives, and we felt the shame around that, and we don't want any more of that. And so of course we very instinctually shift blame, right? We shift blame to others. We don't need to feel bad about that, it's normal and natural that we do, it's just not helpful.

We all have very tender, vulnerable hearts, and we've been bruised ever since childhood, we've had the slings and arrows of life. And we've felt blame, and we felt shame, and of course we don't want any more of that. So when anything happens we just instinctually want to deflect blame. Well, the problem with that is that in doing so we give away our power. I think in order to, there's things

we can do in the moment, there's lots of strategies and practices we can develop. But I think first of all, we need through a process of reflection to really understand the larger dynamics that are afoot here, what's going on.

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It may make complete sense to blame someone else, someone else may be doing something that's very untoward. And when we attribute the causation for our inner state, what we're feeling to a person, or persons, or even the weather, anything outside of us, as logical as it may seem to do so, we're giving away our power, because we can't control those things. We all know we can't control the weather, it's getting more and more obvious but we can't control other people, and Lord knows we try, right?

All of us have tried to control our spouses, and parents, and children, and boyfriends, and girlfriends, and co-workers, and it just doesn't work. People are uncontrollable. How do we know that beyond a shadow of a doubt? Because we know we're uncontrollable. No matter how much someone else tries to intimidate us, or control us, we'll find our way. We're endlessly creative in getting our own needs met, and so people are uncontrollable.

So what is the thing that we have any hope of control over? Ourselves. And that's challenging enough, because we have all that childhood conditioning, and all our habitual patterns, but at least we have a chance with ourselves. And it's really important to understand here that what we need to do is get out of the paradigm of blame altogether. It's not helpful to blame ourselves, or to shame ourselves.

When we blame others we give our power away. And this has certainly nothing to do with blaming victims either. It's where do I have personal power and choice? That's with myself, with learning to understand myself, developing self-awareness, capacity for self-regulation, looking at my part in things. When I'm in the midst of a conflict, I'm unhappy, I'm in some kind of conflict, I've gotten caught up in it. I can look, what's my part in this? And I'm not looking to blame myself, I'm looking to further understand, to develop greater emotional intelligence and wisdom about, how do I end up in situations? Because if I understand how I end up in particular situations, then I can do something different in the future, and create different possibilities for myself.

If I can see how I got from point A to B to C to D and I'm not happy here at D, well, I know next time I can make a different turn. I can turn right instead of left, or what have you, right? And so it's really just for the purpose of learning, and then also understanding that as rational as it seems to want to apportion blame. Some people will get this modeled a little bit and go, okay, I see, I got on my part, I'm willing to own my part.

Let's say you and I were in a conflict, we're involved in some business deal and it went south. And we were both ready to go to fisticuffs, and we had friends, don't do that, you're going to end up in lawsuits. So then we're ready to lawyer up, and they say, no, don't do that, you're going to blow all your money on lawyers. And somebody says, I know this mediator, please go see this mediator. So we do, we sit down with the mediator and we both tell our stories, and the mediator said, boy, I don't know what to do here, you guys are both really great salespeople, very compelling.

The mediator said, well, I got an idea here, we do have the videotape of what went down. I'm going to put together a focus group of a dozen really smart people, that don't know either one of you,

couldn't give a hoot about either one of you, and we'll see what they think. We say, okay, you're reluctant because you're a little nervous, I'm confident because I know it's all your fault.

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The mediator goes and does that, and comes back and says, you know Fleet I have to say, they did agree that Alex carries more of the fault here. And I said, boy, I'm glad you found such a brilliant group of people, and they realized it's all Alex's fault. And the mediator goes, no, please, you do have to take your part. In fact, they thought it was kind of like 70/30, 60/40. And I said, well, as long as we agree it's mostly Alex's fault. And I feel vindicated, I feel good about that.

The mediator keeps pushing me, no, you got... Okay, maybe I did have some small part. I don't think it rises to 30 or 40%, but yes, I'll own my part, but it's still mostly his part. It's his fault, and I feel vindicated. So does it make sense that I feel vindicated there? Because by definition, I'm unhappy with this situation, right? And if I believe whether it's 60%, 70%, or 100% of the causation is with you, or even 20% of the causation with you, who did I just put in charge of my inner state? You.

Because until you change, I don't get to feel okay, or be happy. So I just put you in charge of my internal state. And we do that all the time when we're blaming. So it's not that a rational group of people might not decide that apportion some of the responsibility at fault to you, but I can't control you.

I'm interested in my part, and what I can do with my part, right? And there may even be situations where I get as honest, radically honest, as I can in something, and I really can't see that I had any relationship to it at all, unless it's past life stuff. Who would know about such a thing, right? And everybody would agree with me. I was just complete innocent bystander. Okay, well, what can I own there?

I'm at a choice point. What am I going to do with this situation? Am I going to let it turn me down? Am I going to embrace a victim mindset? Now, it may be completely, perfectly well and reasonable to feel victimized, and we may need a lot of validation for that. We may need support. But if I stay stuck in that victim mindset, it's going to be very limiting to me.

Instead I can go, okay, what choices do I have here? I don't see that I had anything to do with this. Everybody agrees with me. It's all coming from over there. But what are my choices? What's the most creative way I can respond to this? To take this as a challenge so my life goes forward instead of letting this take me down into bitterness, and reactivity, and anger, and victimization. We're always at these choice points, right? And this coming back into the sphere of toxic relationships, especially when people are locked into marriages, or business relationships, or other situations where it really is, we'd all agree, it's a toxic relationship, and it's creating harm. It's really important to be able to start focusing on what my choices are. And that's where we have the most power, is beginning to embrace choice.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that in situations like that, particularly in intimate relationship, where maybe something can be argued either way, that if we're in a relationship with someone that we love, and we have to be right. When we make someone we love always wrong, in a way, we're sort of

creating a dynamic where we're never actually going to be happy, right? It's like where our sense of our capacity to self-regulate, and feel good, is dependent upon someone else being wrong.

[00:21:00] Dr Fleet Maul

Absolutely, and being right is very addictive. One of the roots of the Radical Responsibility model withdraws on many things that have been in human culture for millennia. There was Professor Edward Deming, who's often credited with the resurgence of the Japanese economy post World War II, and then often called the father of American manufacturing. Things like Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma, if anybody's familiar with that world, go back to Edward Deming.

He was the efficiency guy, and the quality control guy. He had a model early, goes way back, and other people have extrapolated on this, and developed various models from it. He drew a line across a paper, and below the line he just had three things. He had blame. I think he had blame, resentment, and shame or blame, justification, and shame.

We have a bigger model where we talk about blame, resentment, justification, being right, and shame. But his initial one was a little simpler, and then above the line was responsibility. And he was an efficiency guy, right? So he wasn't demonizing getting caught up in blame, or justification, or resentment, or shame. Shaming oneself is what that meant, blaming oneself.

He was just saying, it's inefficient, it's a waste of time and energy. It doesn't take you anywhere, the only thing that takes you anywhere is embracing ownership. Now it's natural, we're going to find ourselves blaming, we're going to find ourselves shaming ourselves, we're going to find ourselves feeling resentful, we're going to find ourselves justifying our own behaviors, and we're going to find ourselves being right.

And it's so addictive all these things, and all these things work. We get emotional payoffs when we blame. It feels good to get their fault, right? Or when we hold on to these old feelings, we keep chewing on them, yeah... Or, of course I had to do that, I had no choice, I was totally justified. We get these emotional payoffs from these what he would have called, he talked about above the line, below the line.

I call it the empowerment zone and the drama zone. So these drama zone strategies, they work on some level, we get emotional payoffs. But I call this the junk food of our emotional life, quick payoff, lasting suffering, right? You grab the junk food, you get 10 seconds of pleasure, and then you have to get on a treadmill for 2 hours to work off the calories.

Plus all the other effects on the body from eating high sugar, high fat things, and salt things, and so forth. It's like the junk food of our emotional life. Whereas embracing ownership is the blue sky of life, it's where all the good things are. It's living at choice.

And it doesn't mean we're letting other people off the hook. It just means we're focusing on, where are my choices here? And my choice may be in a certain situation to seek justice, but seeking justice from a place of self-empowerment, and clarity, and wisdom, and choice, is very different from doing so from a place of fear, and reactivity, and victimization, and probably more effective in the end.

[00:24:12] Alex Howard

Yeah. I'm also curious as to what the role of forgiveness is in this. Sometimes you're saying that there are times where it's as much about our stuff, and our reactivity, and our inability to self-regulate our nervous system, because of how we're responding to what's happening. And then there are times where actually things are happening which are unhealthy dynamics, and we can talk maybe about boundaries in a little bit, and how we may change those dynamics. But what's the role of forgiveness here, when sometimes it feels like the risk is that we forgive and then the same pattern just happens again and again?

Dr Fleet Maul

Forgiveness is really an important thing to look at here, and a very complicated thing. And often we equate forgiveness with letting somebody off the hook. And it can feel very disempowering to forgive, or it may just keep us locked into the cycle of a toxic relationship. So I like to look at forgiveness at three levels.

So the first level, I'm suffering. As an expression I can't remember where this came from, when we get caught up in grievances and we hold on, we're chewing away, we're suffering, and we may hang on to a grievance for a long time. The other person may have moved on, they're on the beach in Bali, they haven't thought about us in years. And we're still churning away up there. So it's like we're giving them free rent in our head, we're giving them a big leather couch, a widescreen TV, we're making nachos for them every night, and they haven't thought about us in months, or years. So who's suffering? It's like that ancient Taoist expression, holding on to grievances, and hatred, and enmity, is like taking poison and hoping the other person will die.

Who's suffering? So from that perspective, the first stage of forgiveness can be in my own enlightened self-interest. I'm going to take this enmity, this grievance, this thing, and I'm just going to let it go. I'm going to put it over here on the shelf, I'm not dismissing it, it was a terrible thing, but I don't want it to rule my life. I want to move forward in my life, so I'm going to consciously do some work to let it go, and set it over here. That can be the first stage of forgiveness.

The next stage could be, I feel like I want to go deeper than that. I really want to make sure that stays over there, or I want to dissolve it further. And we have some inspiration to do that. I may want to do some work to really get to a place where I can internally forgive this person. And often what can help that is various awareness practices. There are meditative practices to help me see that this person who's acted in ways that may have really, actually caused suffering for me, regardless of my part in it or not, but they may have really done things that may even be very unforgivable by most of our standards.

That this is a suffering human being, and there are meditations we can do, like, just like me this person was once a child full of awe and wonder. Just like me, this person has been hurt and disappointed. Just like me, this person wants to be happy. Just like me, this person has suffered. I can do these reflections to try to see this person's humanity, see their suffering, and find some way.

And then also looking at my part in the entanglement of the things, and finding a way to forgive myself and realize yes, I get caught up in these things because I have all this childhood conditioning. That is the human inheritance, and the human condition, and I didn't have the awareness not to get tangled that time. So I'm going to forgive myself for that.

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And this person is a suffering human being, and I'm going to further dissolve this, and just really let it go. That's a second level of forgiveness. I still may not ever reconcile with that person, and that could even be a family member. I've worked with people who have a parent who they just cannot allow into their life, or will not allow around their children, which is a very painful thing for everybody on all sides.

But they're clear, and other people in their life are clear, their advisors are clear, that you can do all the work to forgive, but that person is still harmful in some way, or a danger. Or you're not in a place where you can deal with them. You're going to get hooked back in, despite all the work you've done, they're going to hook you back in. So we may do a lot of inner forgiveness and still say, not in this lifetime, I'm sorry, you're over there.

Or there can be a third stage where we actually decide, especially if it's a family member, that I'm going to get all the support and the help I need. But I do want to see if I can reconcile and repair the relationship. But each one of these, one doesn't require the other, they're all very valid steps, and very helpful steps, and they're all in the realm of forgiveness.

Alex Howard

In a way, as you said, sometimes we can forgive, but we might not want to forget. We might want to have a very clear boundary with that person in our lives. What do you find supports people putting in place those boundaries? Because often there's a lot of narrative that we're not safe to do so, or we're not worthy of doing so, or the other person is going to be really hurt. And we have an empathic quality, and want to protect them. So what do you find helps people put those boundaries effectively in place?

Dr Fleet Maul

Boundary issues have everything to do with the quality of our relationships, and the quality of our lives. And many of us didn't have good boundaries modeled to us growing up. Either our parents were too distant, or too invasive, or they didn't have good boundaries themselves. And so by the time we're adults, we are where we are.

And it's often helpful to get help in therapy, and other contexts, to recognize that we have boundary issues, and we have this and that. But it's also really where self-understanding and self-awareness comes into play, to really understand what are the kind of situations I get tangled up in and why? What are the dynamics of that?

Boundaries on some level are fairly simple. It's knowing when to say yes, and when to say no to ourselves, and others. So if I can't say no to myself, am I going to accomplish much in life, if I can't delay immediate gratification to work on things that are a bit more challenging? No, I'm not going to accomplish much.

If I can't say yes to myself, am I going to have any joy or happiness in life? No. So it's knowing when to say yes, and when to say no to ourselves, and over our lifetime hopefully we develop greater and greater discernment. And that's really what you call wisdom, right?

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And then the same thing with others. If I can't say no to others, I'm a doormat, I'm just going to be a doormat. If I can't say yes to others, I'm not going to have any relationship. So it's knowing when to say yes, and when to say no, and getting wiser and wiser at that.

Another thing that I find very helpful in everything we've been talking about, I use it a lot in my work, is Stephen Karpman's Drama Triangle. And really understanding this dynamic, this triangulation that creates and perpetuates drama. He laid it out in these three roles, which we're all very familiar with. It's the classic roles in any melodrama, and all our favorite TV shows, movies, and whodunits; it's the persecutor, the bad guy, the bad girl; it's a rescuer, the hero; and then the victim. And in Karpman's model, these are not names we're putting on people, but these are roles, personas, psychological positions that we all get caught in.

He talks about the victim mindset, the persecutor mindset, and the rescuer mindset. Very often what keeps some of us plugged into a toxic relationship is we're really hooked in the rescuer mindset. We've got some rescuer dynamic going on in our personality. All these things are about power. We can embrace the victim mindset as a place to create an identification around that. That gives us, even though it's all about powerlessness, we can still have some sense of power, use the victim mindset to try to regain power.

If that doesn't work, sometimes we go to the persecutor mindset and we'll be judging, persecuting, even abusing, as a way to get control, to get power. Well, why am I doing that? Because underlying that, I feel powerless. So we say the underlying position of the persecutor is the victim position because it comes out of powerlessness.

The rescuer, which tends to get the white hat, the good guy image, but I think the rescuer role is even more insidious in some way because they're riding in on that white horse to the rescue. But if it's what we're talking about is a psychological rescuer, and we all have these things going on to one degree or another, it's how I get to feel good about myself. I'm in that one up position. Don't forget who the victim is, and who the rescuer here is. I'm helping people, essentially, but from up here. And I'm getting my ego needs met by being the savior, the fixer. And often then I feel resentful because people don't appreciate me saving them, or I have that martyr complex, and so forth.

We all have these dynamics, they're in the culture, they were modeled to us to one degree, they're in our family of origin. Everything, it's just everywhere. If you start looking out in the world, you just see the drama triangle everywhere, from individual relationships, out to the stage of global warfare, and so forth. It's just constant. Now, of course, it's in all of our media and entertainment, we can watch a reality TV show, or a good movie, but it's entertainment. But living in the midst of that is a different story. If we learn to recognize these dynamics, again, this comes back to self-awareness.

When I start to get triggered, when I start to get caught up in things, do I tend to go to the victim mindset? Do I go to the persecutor? Do I go to the rescuer? All three? Do I go this way? And really learning that about myself.

I may be plugged into a relationship, but what's really plugged into that toxic relationship and keeps me there? Because I think if I leave, that person will commit suicide. If I leave, that person's life will be destroyed if I leave. What's hooked in is my rescuer mindset.

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It's not even really me. That's why we can get out of the whole world of self blame, because none of this stuff is me. It's just conditioning. It's just psychological dynamics that have momentum, that are in my conditioning, they're in me, they're in our culture, and so forth. And so if we can think of it, not I got hooked in, or I'm so weak that I got hooked in. No, my rescuer thing got hooked in there. And that can be very empowering.

I can step back and see, oh, that's how my rescuer thing gets hooked, or when I find myself persecuting, oh, that's how my persecutor gets hooked and activated. Or I find myself really feeling, oh, that's how my victim thing gets. And we develop that self-awareness, and from that self-awareness begins our freedom to make new choices.

Alex Howard

One of the challenges that happens here is that when we're in, for example, the rescuer, we can feel that what we're doing is very important and we're helping, and we're saving the situation. And so we can think we're not part of the problem, we're part of the solution. But I think what's really important in the point that you're making is that in a way, what's happening is often perpetuating that cycle, and it allows that dynamic to keep going.

What's hard is we can have that self-awareness, we can have the capacity to self-regulate, we can see the dynamics that are playing out in relationships. But to walk away, to really hold up that boundary, and to walk away, it also takes courage. For me, thinking about almost what's the central quality in a lot of what you're describing, the courage to see things that are hard to see in terms of self-awareness. The courage to forgive when it feels difficult to forgive, or to put that boundary in place. And I'm curious as to how you see courage in this, and also what supports us in accessing it.

Dr Fleet Maul

Yes, absolutely, it requires courage. But I think it's important to look at what are the antecedents of courage. First of all, by developing greater self-awareness, capacity for self-regulation, we feel more empowered, and the awareness we're starting to understand that these things aren't me. These are aspects of my conditioning that get hooked here and hooked there. And I can develop this more dispassionate witness mind where I can see, oh, I understand what happened there, my rescuer got hooked, my victim mindset got hooked, my persecutor mindset got hooked. I see that. Okay. And, okay, now how can I untangle that, make different choices and step away? So that all feels very empowering.

And also it starts to get me in touch with a part of my being which is deeper than all that conditioning. And I start to recognize that despite all the lies I've heard since childhood; that I'm not broken, that I am enough, that I have, as we all do, unconditional innate goodness and wholeness, that I am ultimately unconditionally worthy. And I start to really experience that through the self-reflection work I'm doing, the self-awareness practices I'm doing, through seeing my conditioning as a separate thing from who and what I really am.

I start to get in touch with a place of myself that is naturally courageous, and feels innately worthy. More and more, my sense of self-worth doesn't depend on confirmation from the world, and

doesn't depend on what's happening out there. I'm really experiencing this, it's not conceptual, I'm really experiencing it. That in itself gives me courage.

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Also, I begin to recognize that in others. I begin to recognize that others have that innate wholeness. Now, they may be suffering, they may be in a place where their lives are fairly out of control. They may be acting in very untoward ways. But I still see there is a divine being, there is that wholeness back there, and they're going through their life, and I'm not responsible for that life. I'm responsive to, I believe that's personally my own kind of philosophy and moral philosophy in a sense, that I feel responsible to the world to do my best, to be kind, and compassionate to others, and participate in other ways that is win-win beneficial. But I'm not ultimately responsible for other people's journey.

I trust that there is that divine principle back there, or there is that ultimate goodness that that being is going through their journey, and in the long run, over many lifetimes, it's going to work its way through. And I can't control that, and I'm not in charge of that.

Both those things start to give me kind of a natural courage, and then I can also through developing this further self-understanding and insight about all these dynamics, I can begin to see that my staying engaged is actually keeping them from changing. It's keeping them from growing, it's keeping them caught in a game that is destructive for them. And that my extricating myself from this, and having the courage to make those boundaries in a compassionate way.

I remember reading a story, I think in a book decades ago. Someone was traveling in India, they're in areas and streets where there was tremendous poverty and beggars, it's overwhelming. And they were going down the street, it was in an open automobile, I guess this is quite a long time ago. And they're just being assaulted practically, by all the beggars and so forth. And this person asked, what do I do? to their spiritual teacher. They were talking to a spiritual teacher, and they said, with all the love in your heart, take your umbrella and just push those people off. You have a right to protect yourself, but you can do so with love. You don't have to do it out of hatred.

I think it's the ability to learn, to develop first. I do believe we're all participating in the world, and we're not ultimately responsible for others. But I do feel we're called to be responsive to the world, and we're called to be responsive to others suffering. But we first need to be loyal to ourselves, we first need to be loyal to ourselves. And I think developing that loyalty, that appreciation of our own worthiness, and that we are worthy of love, we are worthy of being safe, we are worthy of dignity, and that we need to have first that loyalty to ourselves, and then a responsiveness to others.

And I think, through that we develop a tremendous sense of self-empowerment and courage, and then we're actually able to be much more compassionate with others, without it getting caught in that rescuer mindset, which may feel like compassion. People may see it as compassion, but it's really not, it's just ego dynamics playing.

Alex Howard

I was just thinking, Fleet, as you were talking, that your organization, the Heart Mind Institute, that what I'm really hearing you say here is that, the self-awareness is our capacity of our mind to see what's happening in us, and to see what's happening in others, and to see those different dynamics. But ultimately we have to lead from our hearts, and there has to be that place of

kindness and empathy. So it just really struck me the importance of bringing together those qualities.

[00:42:38] Dr Fleet Maull

Absolutely. And really needs to begin with ourselves. It needs to begin with self-compassion and self-empathy, and really developing a really loyal, friendly relationship with ourselves. Like we're our own best friend, and then from that place we can be a good friend to others.

Alex Howard

As you said, our relationships can be one of the greatest potentials and gifts in our lives. And I'm mindful we're out of time, but there's a piece that I realized that we didn't touch on, that forgive me if we've got a couple of minutes, I'd like you just to speak to. Which is that people will know from our other interviews, and people that have the membership of Conscious Life can go back and watch other interviews that we've done, that you had a sustained period of being incarcerated. And what struck me is the absence of contact in relationship. I know that you have a very happy and loving relationship with your wife at this point. Maybe you can just say a few words about the absence, but also the gift and the beauty of relationship done well.

Dr Fleet Maull

Yeah, it's an interesting trajectory in my life, that I had this very mixed life early on, involved in a lot of craziness, and a counterculture on drugs. But I was also always a spiritual seeker. So I managed to earn my way into a federal prison sentence, a drug sentence for 14 years. I have deep regrets about the impact those behaviors had on others, but it ended up being a very transformative time for me.

I came in with a lot of skills, I've been trained as a meditation teacher, I've been practicing meditation for 15 years. I had a three year clinical master's degree in psychology, I came in with a lot of skills. Fortunately, I got locked up, all the craziness went away, and there I was in this world, and ostensibly a very toxic world, and a world where I really needed to take care of myself, job one, right, survive. I was able in that environment because of the training I'd had.

Because even though I'd had my issues, and I hadn't solved all my issues, and compartmentalizing some things. I still had done a lot of work on myself, and I had a lot of clarity. And actually even by the time I ended up going to prison, I'd really let go of most of the dynamics that had gotten me there.

I had a strong sense of self-worth, I had a strong confidence in my own innate goodness, because when you're in that environment it's an assault on your personhood. The whole thing, constantly an assault on your personhood. And so I really learned about navigating the field of relationships in that environment, because I was going to be there a long time. Initially, I thought I was going to be there for possibly 25 years, until I figured out how the good time worked, if I stayed out of trouble. And thank goodness I managed to stay out of trouble, but I was going to be there a long time, and I wanted to do something with that part of my life.

I didn't just want to sleep through it, or pretend it wasn't happening, or try to just consider it down. I wanted to serve, and I ended up being very engaged. I led a very contemplative life, a lot of study and practice of meditation, but I also taught school. I had a day job helping people learn to read

and get GEDs, and so forth, helped start the first hospice program in a prison, anywhere with teaching and meditation, very involved in twelve steps.

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A very engaged life in there, in a world that was very dangerous, that danger around every corner, constantly. It was really a great laboratory for learning how to navigate relationships in a very different way.

It was actually a man I met early on in prison, in the first couple of years, I have a vague memory of this, so I'm trying to bring him back right now. But he'd been in for a while, he was an educated person, and had ended up in prison. And he talked about how prison can have the impact of humanizing you. And you can learn to be much more considerate, because out in the world, we have a tendency, all of us, to be pretty egocentric and narcissistic on some level. I don't mean clinical narcissism, but we're the center of our own universe, are you making my world better? We're pretty self-focused, it's a human condition.

But you get there in prison and that doesn't work anymore, because there's a whole different dynamic of power there, power of violence, power of gangs, and then ultimately the authorities have all the power. So you have to learn to navigate the field of relationship from a place of powerlessness. Unless you want to become a bully and try to become a gang guy, and do that and you're going to have a very violent life, maybe die, or end up in a hole a lot.

But if you don't want that, you have to learn to become very skillful, I don't mean manipulative, but you have to genuinely, become a lot more considerate. This guy was telling me that after being in prison, people can come out of prison much more decent human beings, much more considerate of others. And there is a very strong thing about being considerate in that environment. I mean, just how you relate to taking care of the bathrooms, and others needs, and what you do, and standing in line. There's a specter of threat violence around some of that. So I'm not saying it's an enlightened world, but you do learn to be more considerate of other people's needs.

At some point you're doing that to stay alive, but you still learn to be more considerate. And so I feel by the time I got out of prison, I had a much greater capacity for relationship than when I went in.

Actually, my last relationship, my off and on relationship, before I went into prison, was with a wonderful woman. We had been together, broke up, been together, broke up, and I was never ever really able to surrender to that relationship. I slept around a lot, I was very promiscuous, I was not a good boyfriend, even though we ended up being best friends throughout all my prison time. I got out, we considered getting back together, but actually then she got cancer and died just a year after I got out, which was incredibly painful. But I was not a good boyfriend to be in relationship. Even though I thought I was a good person on some levels, I wasn't an intentionally bad person, but I was not a good boyfriend, or a good partner before I went to prison. I came out capable of being in relationship. And I've had a number of major relationships since I've been out.

I lost my previous partners to cancer twice. I've been in relationship with my wife now for seven or eight years, and it's the most wonderful relationship of my life. All my relationships coming out of prison have been wonderful, deep relationships, real partnership relationships. Prison trained me to be able to do that, ironically. It really is about becoming less egocentric and less narcissistic, but

what allows that is we get more in touch with our own self-worth, because our egocentricity and our narcissism comes out of our feelings of unworthiness.

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The more deeply grounded we become in our own self-worth, then we're actually able to be much more generous, and much more altruistic, and much more loving, and much more relational. We also begin to really understand the dynamics of how you can really attend to someone else's needs without giving away your own. It doesn't have to be a constant negotiation and push pull. You actually develop a wisdom about, there are constantly win-win opportunities to get your own needs met, and be getting your partner's needs met.

In a more superficial way, even if you have that intention, with less wisdom, it can feel like a constant negotiation. Okay, you get to do that, if I get to do this. But with more wisdom, it becomes more of a flow, it becomes more of a flow. And I'm really grateful to be in a place in my life where I have a beautiful marriage with an amazing woman, Sophie, and our life and our marriage really is more and more in flow all the time.

Alex Howard

That's beautiful. So, Fleet, people that want to find out more about you and your work, and ideally don't want to go and do a sustained period in prison to learn how to have healthy relationships.

Dr Fleet Maull

I have recommended that to people. How do I go? Well, there are certain things you could do where you'd be guaranteed to only get five years.

Alex Howard

That's one pathway... So people that want to find out more about you and your work, where's the best place to go? And some of what they can find?

Dr Fleet Maull

Well, they can start with my basic website, fleetmaull.com. And I think you can find everything else in my nonprofit prison work, as well as [Heart Mind Institute](http://HeartMindInstitute.com). You can find it all through there. But if they want to go directly to the website where I have all my online courses, and as well as the Radical Responsibility course and so forth, they can go to Heart Mind Institute, which is heartmind.co. If they want to directly check out the book Radical Responsibility, they can go to radicalresponsibilitybook.com.

Alex Howard

Amazing Fleet. I always enjoy our conversations. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

[00:52:06] Dr Fleet Maul

Well, thank you for having me, Alex. I really enjoy our conversations as well. And it's incredible work that you do, both clinically, and in terms of your incredible educational summits and super conferences that you bring to the world. So very grateful for our connection and relationship.

Alex Howard

Thanks, Fleet.