



## How Truth Liberates Us in Relationships

**Guest: Jessica Britt**

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### **[00:00:10] - Alex Howard**

Welcome everyone to this interview where I'm really pleased to be talking with Jessica Britt. Jessica has been a spiritual teacher and training director of the Diamond Approach since 1985.

In the '70s, she specialized in the field of childhood sexual and physical abuse. The '80s saw her on the Gestalt staff at Esalen, where she initiated groups for adults with childhood abuse. And in her decades of inner work, she has gained a unique perspective on the impacts of trauma on the spiritual journey and its practices.

And in this interview, we're going to be exploring really how we show up to ourselves and how that's important in relationship. We'll also talk about the importance of truth. And sometimes the tendency that we can have in relationship is to fixate on the bits of truth which are convenient to us and not really to see that whole truth. And that is really the place that I think we can find real intimacy and real liberation within our relationships.

So Jessica, welcome. I'm so pleased that you're here.

### **Jessica Britt**

Lovely, Alex. I'm happy to be here with you also. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, you and me both. I really enjoyed the conversation that we had for our last Trauma Super Conference. You and I were just talking before we started recording about there are different places that we could go and we will go in this interview.

One of the things that I was reflecting on is relationships, of course and that's part of why I'm sure many folks are here, can be the source of the greatest pain and suffering in our lives, but they can also be the place of our greatest joy and happiness.

And I'm interested, you and I were just talking also before we started recording about loss and grief and people that are special in our lives who are not around forever. I'm curious as to when you think about relationship and the gift of relationship, what that means and why that's so precious?

### **Jessica Britt**

As soon as you asked me the question, I immediately start sensing my heart. I knew we were going to have this conversation today and I was contemplating not just what I wrote you about the

theme, but just the word relationship and was really feeling into, from one perspective the whole creative movement of reality is an unfoldment of relationships.

### **[00:03:06]**

We could look at it from so many different ways. The relationship of the sun to the moon, the ocean to the shore. That relationship is the creative expression of who and what we are. It's how we live.

Even a person who's a hermit in the woods who's getting away from relationship, impossible. It's impossible. He's got a relationship with the trees. He's got a relationship with the ground he's sleeping in. His whole body is a response to how he organizes himself. I noticed it could be also a woman, but most of the hermit stories are men.

Relationship is just one of the fundamental laws of how creation happens is in relationship. And out of that there's a fundamental goodness in relationship. There's a fundamental goodness in the creativity of relationship. In a certain way you could say it's how true nature can best express itself, express its loving nature, its kindness nature, its courageous nature.

When you think about our human qualities that we really love, there are qualities that arise in relationship. Even a painter with his canvas, a mother with a child. So it's like a fundamental law of how reality works. And from a soulful perspective that is the most precious, to really be engaged in relationship, to feel your relationship as a creative expression of the sacred or of the beautiful or of that place in us that is constantly moving towards the good, towards the better. I just noticed I could just go on and on.

### **Alex Howard**

As you're talking, the thing that is in my mind is that the relationship is this fabric really of everything. But then people typically think of relationship being relationship with other people or for example, intimate or family relationship. But of course, we're also all in relationship with ourselves.

We're in relationship with our own hearts, with our own history, with our own being. And in a way it's that relationship which most shapes all of the other relationships. And so maybe you can say a little bit about why it's so important to explore that?

### **Jessica Britt**

Such a big topic. What I realize is we're right in the middle of the essence of the mystery of creation with what I'm about to say. So we'll start with a pregnancy. So here a man and a woman come together. Classically, we think of relationship as a gathering of two humans is what we call relationship. So to talk about pregnancy, we're talking about a man and a woman come together and there's a conception and there's a new form, a new human form developing inside the mother.

There's been so much psychological research that not only the mother's feeling about herself that you were pointing to, her feeling about being pregnant, how the environment is holding her pregnancy, how the man that's the father of the child is holding the pregnancy, that all these emotional environmental factors impact and touch the new human developing in the womb.

And then at birth, those of you who have had the blessing of being with a newborn, so innocent, so open. They have no idea that they have a nose, they have no idea what their name is. They have no idea about anything.

**[00:07:41]**

What happens? Another person starts telling the newborn, 'Oh, that's your nose. Oh, your name is John.' So from the outside we're often told who we are. And depending on the parental environment, the parents can really reflect some basic truth about this infant, about this new being. Or the parents could be really off and the child has to start molding themselves to what the parents are saying, but there's something else that's moving inside of them.

So that our very sense of self is formed in a combination of how we experience ourselves and how our parents experience us, what they tell us about ourselves, what the teachers tell us about ourselves, what the other kids in the neighborhood tell us about ourselves. So our very identity is created in a field of relationship.

With a good enough family and a good enough environment, we tend to create a sense of self that's more in harmony with the truth of our depth. We're not as much at war with ourself and we kind of come out of the whole process feeling pretty good about ourself.

But there are other folks who the environment and all kinds of reasons, their deeper sense of self is so not seen and they have to so distort themselves to just survive the family. That they come out of it not feeling so good about themselves. All happening in a field of relationship.

### **Alex Howard**

And of course, what then happens is whatever that dynamic is, we normalize to that. One of the things that's really been in my mind recording interviews for this conference is how difficult it can be to see our patterns, because it's like the way we see what we need to see. What we need to see is the lens through which we see it. That's what I'm trying to say.

And so it's really hard to see it clearly because it is the lens through which it's being perceived. If, for example, what we've learned is that there's something unlovable or something about us that's not enough, the very issue of that we're seeing through that lens. It just strikes me how tricky it can then be for people to really see themselves in truth as opposed to see themselves through those veils and through those lenses.

### **Jessica Britt**

Yes. Basically what you're saying is that people are seeing themselves through multiple lenses. They're seeing themselves through their mother's lens, through their father's lens, through the church's lens, through their neighbor's lens. And to kind of get back to one's own self experience, I want to even say one's own purity of being, one's own basic goodness. There's a lot to move through. It's not easy. It takes a certain kind of, here's one of the good news about suffering.

### **Alex Howard**

There's good news?

### **Jessica Britt**

Exactly. For some people, suffering and feeling so misaligned with oneself, even though you don't have words for it, that's just this soul agitation can set off in some people a flame to want to find out what is the truth. Something feels so off here, I'm determined to find the truth. And for many people it might even be like attending this conference and listening to our conversation.

Really something in them is moving because there's something, all spiritual teachers say that there's something deep in the consciousness that is moving towards the harmonic, the positive

alignment with truth, dignity, basic goodness. All the different ways of expressing the fundamental wonder and goodness of the mystery that we even exist.

**[00:12:19]**

And so that motivation sometimes comes out of suffering. Even the name of your conference, Healing Toxic Relationships. First of all, one of the things I was remembering is many years ago, I used to do a lot of work with couples, and it's so much easier to get an individual to see a therapist. To get a couple to go see a couple's therapist? That is so sensitive. We could write a book about it.

**Alex Howard**

I was joking the other day with Meagen, who's my co-host in the conferences, and we were both laughing that people go to couples therapy to get the therapist to sort out their partner. They effectively go to recruit the therapist to help point out to the partner what they can't see. And it seems almost like a universal truth, isn't it? I know I've been guilty of that as well.

**Jessica Britt**

Not only that, you can appreciate why the partner doesn't want to go. They already feel that their partner, oh, let's go to couples therapy and go, oh yeah, you want the therapist to fix me.

**Alex Howard**

It's gone from one against one to now two against one.

**Jessica Britt**

Exactly. So there's that whole thing that there's a place in us, in all human beings, where part of the basic goodness of a child and I saw this over and over again, a parents' divorce, young children have a tendency to blame themselves for the parents' divorce. So one way that the loving nature, the fundamental soulfully loving nature of all beings, one of the ways it comes through a child is the child blames themselves for the difficulties in the family.

And we have language for this in the psychological world, the superego, the inner critic, self-blame. So there's that tendency in ourselves to blame ourselves for the problems. But it's so uncomfortable. It's what I call passing the hot potato. And you see this in couples. It's so uncomfortable that of course we want to blame someone else, and we want to throw the hot potato to the other.

So when I used to do couples work, the first sessions were like, pass the hot potato. Who was going to take the blame? Whose fault was it? And the reality is it's nobody's fault. And that's the challenging part.

How to open up a space between a couple that's having a hard time and to be as open and non-blaming, non-judgmental as possible. To infuse that in the space to say, okay, we're just going to be a detective here. We're just going to take a look, there's someplace where you guys are tangled up. My guess is, another basic principle, this is not the first time in your life you've been tangled up with a person. These relationship tangles tend to happen over and over again until we learn the lesson. I hate to say it that way, it's so new agey, but it's true.

**Alex Howard**

But it's also like in a way we recreate the same dynamics until we learn to do something different. There's maybe a metaphysical element but there's also just a kind of human behavioral element.

**[00:16:22] - Jessica Britt**

It's psychological. Freud knew a thing or two. I mean there's a joke we marry our parent and in our teens and our twenties and our thirties, there's a very high chance that you're just marrying one of your parents or a combination of both your parents. It's a part of the conditioning.

And so as we were saying earlier, or I was saying earlier, our sense of self is created through a pattern of relationships. It's not our fundamental self, but a child really takes that sense of self that's formed in relationship as 'me'. And in what we're calling toxic relationships, you're bringing that 'me' is usually full of a lot of negativity and knows themselves through negativity, through being judged for being evaluated.

So you pick a partner that's got a watchful eye on you and you can feel the pressure. What's he going to think about me? She's going to tell me I really fucked up. And we're just recreating that childhood field in our adult relationships. Well, the challenge, and you brought in the word curiosity before, is you know when you're in a relationship that isn't working. You feel miserable basically.

Now the challenge is if you have an identity, if your sense of self has always been miserable, you might even say well of course I'm miserable, I don't deserve better. A lot of people think that way. Or there's no way I can move towards changing anything here because the similar process that's going on in you is also going on in your partner.

But in a certain way this is where relationship work can really shift from conventional therapy to spiritual work. Because both people in the relationship are in the relationship from a sense of self that's conditioned and they're just repeating some kind of pattern, basically.

So to heal that toxic relationship is a gigantic step. Meaning you have to be willing to first of all look at the relationship objectively, like oh my God, we are caught in a hairball here. I am living in fear. I feel hateful toward this person. I feel critical towards them. They're afraid of me. What all the conversations are in bad relationships, or relationships that are just stuck in negativity. It's easy to want to blame somebody.

It takes a lot of something to go for a moment I'm going to stop blaming. I need to take a look here. He really is like my father. I really do feel like a twelve year old in this relationship. To actually begin to see the roles and the characters that are happening, already lets you step out of it a little bit and go, oh. And the one that's stepping out of it a little bit is some part of your consciousness that is something other than just the one who's programmed in the relationship. We'll call it a witnessing self.

So if you can enter into the witnessing self and first of all, look at what's my part in this drama that I'm repeating. What's the script I'm following? It can be difficult and challenging to see one's script because to see the script means you have to acknowledge I am conditioned here to react just this way.

If I step out of that reaction and just look. It can be a little disorienting because if I'm always reacting in this way and I step out just a little bit, then you might go, man, we need help. I need help.

And how to approach your partner with we need help and I'm not wanting to have you fixed. I feel touched just saying it. I'm wanting us to see the drama, the play that we're living out and is there something more fundamental about our connection that we can land in and then take a look at our addictive patterns.

**[00:22:02] - Alex Howard**

It strikes me that takes a few things. It takes a courage, like a willingness to do that. And I think it takes a real willingness to see truth. I remember many years ago, as you know, I was a student of many years in the Diamond Approach and I remember my teacher, Sandra Maitri, saying about the importance of love of truth, regardless of what that truth reveals. There's a kind of on one's inner journey if one really wants to get free, whatever freedom is. But if one wants to move through, there has to be that willingness to see truth.

And in a way, it strikes me that it's the same thing in relationship and in those couple dynamics that you're speaking to. What we'll tend to see is see part of the truth, like the truths that are more convenient for us or the truths that place us in an easier light. But to really break out of those dynamics, we have to really see the whole truth. I wonder what creates the space and the safety that allows us to do that?

**Jessica Britt**

That's a kind of challenging question. It takes a few things. Again, I'm going back to my experience as a couple's therapist and my guess is you're going to be talking with a lot of people. You can't make the love of truth happen. Usually one of the two people that initiated the conversation, something is moving in them where they want to lessen the suffering.

Now, if you go along that track, that implies that they want to lessen the suffering, because they intuitively, whether from movies they've seen or a feeling inside of themselves, know that something better is possible. One of the functions of the therapist is to help that person, and maybe even both people, recognize there's something in you that knows something else is possible.

And that something else that is possible could be motivated by a love of truth. That if you track the love of truth, because truth has a way of unfolding and changing, the next thing you know, you're on a movement that keeps unfolding. And the guidance is not only wanting to end suffering, but over time, there's a taste of something more fundamental, more real, more authentic, more kind, more curious, naturally starts unfolding.

Now, one of the things like a conference here, and I don't know who the listeners will be, is some of you will feel and recognize you're in a toxic situation. You're in a situation that has so much negativity in it that something is off. I mean, that just something is off. And so first of all, acknowledge something is off. Acknowledge the tendency to want to blame the other person. That's normal.

And like you said, the courage and the curiosity go, well, what's my part in it? Can I see my part in it? We could call it love of truth. Am I willing to see my part in this? The only thing that will make that possible. Can I look at myself knowing I'm afraid to because I'll start attacking myself or I'll start feeling embarrassed, or I'll start feeling guilty and all these things from childhood that I mentioned earlier and to step away from that and go, okay, I was a shit. Okay, well, why was I a shit? Well, he was a shit. Okay, but what's really going on? There's always the question of don't land on your first answer, he's a shit, I'm a shit.

If you don't stay curious and go, well, why was I? Well, okay, what's really going on here? I felt really unseen. He really didn't notice XYZ. I felt really hurt and I wanted to get him back. So I withheld from him. And everything I'm saying is so normal. This is what people do. And to begin to look at it, I'm going to add with a slight sense of humor. Go ahead. You're going to say something.

**[00:27:28] - Alex Howard**

I was just going to say that we often have this illusion that everyone else's relationship is healthier or better than ours. Both in our internal life but also external life. Because we see people when they're on their best behavior. We don't see what happens behind the closed doors. In a way, what I was partly reflecting on is it's hard enough to see the truth in ourselves.

To really penetrate those, as you say, those multiple lenses and veils and so on. It's even harder, in a way, to see it in relationship. And there's something about being in relationship with someone that we co-create together a level of safety that when we go to those vulnerable places, that we're going to be suitably held and honored and respected in those places.

I was thinking, as you're talking, that some of the times I felt the closest to my wife have been after the most tricky conversations, like the places where we've really gone to those scratchy places, but really been able to hold it because there's something that's real. That's really real on the other side of that, even if it's not always comfortable.

And I'm just wondering for folks that are watching this, that are wondering how to create a space that allows that, as you say, you can't make somebody be able to do that. In a way, there has to be just like you can't make someone love the truth. But what invites it, what increases the probability of being able to have that level of truth in those dynamics?

**Jessica Britt**

As I feel into what you're saying, my first thoughts are the truth. Meaning, I want to have a conversation with you. I am feeling reactive, I'm feeling judgmental, I'm feeling protective, I'm feeling unsafe. Even if you can't say those words to the person, to let yourself know those words. To recognize I'm feeling defensive, I'm feeling protective.

And for some, you might even recognize, oh, this is an old feeling for when my dad would yell at me and I am feeling protective. One of the most challenging things, and you named it, in individual work and in couple work, is the question of vulnerability. Is it safe to drop my defense? I won't get attacked, I won't be shamed, I will be listened to.

So the ingredient that's needed is the suspension of judgmental, critical mind. So even though I might be feeling very angry at the person, can I not act out the anger, acknowledge the anger and recognize I'm angry 90% of the time because I felt hurt, because I'm feeling vulnerable.

Now, you can have all that self-knowledge and you don't have to say that to your partner because it might not be safe yet, but you can approach the partner knowing all that and saying something simple like, we need to talk.

And I'm going to do my best not to be reactive and judgmental because there's a part of me that wants to be reactive and judgmental. Can we talk to each other recognizing our habits? So it's basically building blocks.

But one of the things I think to answer your question more concisely is to recognize that it's a need and what do I need to feel safer? What do you need to feel safer? We've invested such and such and such into our relationship. We've hit a really big snag. Things have worked out for us in the past. Can we approach this moment knowing that we're both on high alert, being oriented to wanting to have it, wanting it to be safer between us.

**[00:32:24] - Alex Howard**

You were just saying around defense, about defensiveness and hurt. And in a way, of course, part of the problem is that the more hurt we have, the more likely we are to get defensive. But then it's

a very fine line between defense and attack. So the more defensive we become and so in a way, the risk is that the more we have hurt, the more we operate in ways that perpetuate that cycle of hurt

**Jessica Britt**

No question. And this way, these kind of conversations, whoever is listening to this conversation begins to put into the environment a recognition that defensiveness and attack often has underneath it deep hurt and vulnerability. Just that piece of information, you see, and to recognize. If you want to bring your partner into couples therapy, you say, I know that it's scary for us to go, I know we'll both feel vulnerable. To acknowledge, there's something very powerful about acknowledging the simple truths.

At that level, most people really probably need support, need to be working with someone. And sometimes you need to do some of your own personal work because you do know you are so quick-triggered that you know you're going to go in there and eat bear, you're going to eat the therapist, you're going to eat your partner.

I need to go do something that I'm not quite as reactive. Why am I so reactive. Being able to question oneself without shame or guilt or attack, this is where that curiosity and that kindness, because we know when we're being assholes, don't we?

**Alex Howard**

Well, it strikes me that how do I know that I'm being an asshole? Let me answer it from that point of view. I know I'm being an asshole when I'm convinced I'm not being an asshole. And what I mean by that is the more righteous I become and the more sure I become, for example, my wife or someone, how wrong they are, it's taken me quite a long time, but I've come to realize that's the highest probability that I'm going to be a bit acting like an asshole.

**Jessica Britt**

Oh, that's fantastic. You see, that is so fantastic. So you have a particular skill at handing the hot potato over.

**Alex Howard**

The whole plate of all the hot potatoes, yeah.

**Jessica Britt**

All the hot potatoes. So just that syndrome, you see, and that pattern, on one level it could be narcissistically hurtful, but that pattern is so universal, it's not even unique to you, but you're speaking it and are being able to laugh about it. We go, oh yeah, I recognize that. And you can almost feel our heads getting hard and you can feel the tightness. Usually it takes a therapist to go notice how hard you are up in your head and notice this stance, because most people aren't self-aware at that level. I mean, that's true.

**Alex Howard**

Just to be clear, Jessica, I'm not always self-aware at that level either.

**Jessica Britt**

I was very clear. Otherwise you wouldn't have done that true confession. That kind of self-knowing, there's two words that I want to bring into the space and might seem tangential. This



whole conversation we're having, at the fundamental bottom of it is, as you said, a love of truth, some kind of fundamental curiosity, being willing to be really a detective for truth. Okay, I really want to see what's going on here. And it could just be totally pragmatic and almost a little cold. What the hell is going on here?

### **[00:36:47]**

The other requirement I want to name is some place in us that's willing not only to see the truth, but to be changed by what we see. Because when you were saying this thing about when I'm most righteous, there is a hardening whenever we're kind of in a hard state, we're wanting to fix it and have certainty of our point of view. To begin to let go of I'm willing to be uncertain for a moment. I'm willing to look from a different point of view. I'm actually maybe willing to listen to my partner's point of view.

To do that could be literally a little disorienting. Am I willing to be changed? Am I willing to not know? Am I willing to lose certainty about the storyline? And that brings up the safety question.

Is there enough safety in the field to let myself not just feel vulnerable or feel less defensive or less rigid, less positioned? Am I willing to feel the loose feeling when a hard position opens up? You could actually feel a little dizzy in your mind. I've had that experience.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, it's the feeling. How it feel to me is it's like the ground starts to not feel stable. It's like the ground starts to move around and like where am I in location to this?

### **Jessica Britt**

Right? And that's where also spiritual practices are very helpful to begin to develop a kind of subtle ground that's not just based in the fixed positions of one's history and begins to reveal that original nature that I pointed out with the infant.

To tolerate being there even though you don't know what your nose is, to be there even though for a moment you don't recognize your wife. Like, oh, I thought she was this and I'm suddenly looking at her with fresh eyes and like, who are you? That's a thrilling place in a relationship. The veil drops. It's unfamiliar. That's very precious. But that means tolerate not knowing. Being unfamiliar.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, I guess that's also the way that a long-term relationship of many years stays interesting and that you get to rediscover someone in new ways.

### **Jessica Britt**

Yes, exactly. Which can allow a kind of tenderness of heart so that the love of truth isn't abstract. You remember your first nights with somebody when you're falling in love. You stay up all night, you make love, like every corner of the person's body is interesting. That freshness and that discovery and that thrill. And in that place yeah, I'm feeling that whole thing where relationship really is the field of creation.

I think there's a reason we say making love. When there's a certain kind of openness and it could just be a kiss on the cheek while your partner is doing the dishes. There's a place where love actually gets made. It's not just a symbolic language and there is a freshness and there is a goodness and there is a beauty.

**[00:40:41]**

And key to that is the openness, is tolerating the vulnerability, the tenderness, the sweetness. And in a certain way, you can start recognizing that. You can begin to feel kindness towards your own defensiveness. No wonder I've been so defensive. It's so delicate in here, it's so sweet in here. It's so precious. And so that in a certain way, our bad behavior is seen with a kind eye.

Of course you developed that tough shell. Of course you wanted to pass the hot potato. So the whole texture of the relationship takes on a field of maturation and growth and development and you are in new territory. You're not living your relationship based on your childhood. The relationship starts arising in the immediacy of your basic nature. And for some reason you love this person.

**Alex Howard**

Well, it's funny you said something when we were recording our interview for the third Trauma Super Conference. We were talking about some of the intensities of childhood trauma, particularly that we can experience. And you said that, these aren't quite your words, but to paraphrase, however horrific the experiences one may have had, that there's a place in us that remains untouched by those experiences and that really sat with me afterwards.

And in a similar vein, it strikes me that there's a sacredness in relationship and there's a preciousness in relationship which transcends the sort of transactional, functional, practical stuff. And so I know we're running out of time, but I feel like it's a nice place to sort of bring this together around the sacredness of relationship in a way that can carry us through some of this hard and sticky stuff that we have to deal with.

**Jessica Britt**

I totally agree with you. I can feel it in this moment, the preciousness and the sacredness. And then in a certain way, you can say the real relationship starts and it goes from, I'll use psychological language, an egoic relationship based in history to a soul relationship based on two beings with a commitment to be as authentic as possible, as courageous, as kind, sense of humor, very important in a good relationship.

Recognizing the sacredness of the relationship, that we are an expression of reality here. And that when we get into a sticky place, that we already know it's something from our past. We already know we're caught in some kind of role or some kind of living out something from some kind of automatic behavior. We recognize our reactivity because we're not really responding from our inner goodness. That preciousness you were talking about. Yes. Beautiful.

**Alex Howard**

I'd love you to say a few words of where people can go to explore further. I know I would have said in the introduction, but you're a teacher in the Diamond Approach, which is where I met my wife. That's a very precious piece for me.

**Jessica Britt**

Did you meet her in an acquiring?

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, we were in the same group. That's how it all happened.

**[00:44:53] - Jessica Britt**

That's very nice.

**Alex Howard**

It's a body of work which is very precious to me personally, but maybe you can say a few words of possible next steps if people want to explore further.

**Jessica Britt**

The work that I do now, I am a teacher in the [Diamond Approach](#), also known as the Ridhwan Foundation. And you can Google it. There's a center in Colorado, there's a center in Berkeley, and it's really designed more towards the individual inner work.

So we don't do couples work and we do mostly interrelational work, like how our sense of self was formed by the relationships in our childhood and kind of opening that up, which can be a great support for your inner life and your outer life. But yeah, the Diamond Approach isn't relationship focused as such, outer relationship focus.

But there is a kind of perspective that the more authentic you are in yourself, the more real you'll be in your life, including your relationship life, and you won't get caught as much.

**Alex Howard**

And apparently it's also a good place for meeting life partners as well.

**Jessica Britt**

I have heard that.

**Alex Howard**

Well, Jessica. Thank you. I really appreciate you and your heart and your time. So thank you.

**Jessica Britt**

You're welcome, Alex. Bye.

