



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Trauma and performance

Guest: Betsy Polatin

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Betsy Polatin.

And we're going to be exploring how trauma can show up in performance. Betsy has decades of experience working with actors and musicians and looking at how understanding and healing their trauma can help them more fully express themselves in those arenas. She's also been co-teaching workshops and programs with both Dr Peter Levine and Dr Gabor Maté for a number of years.

To give you a bit more of Betsy's background, an internationally recognized breathing movement specialist and best-selling author of *Humanal: An Epic Journey To Your Expanded Self*. Betsy Polatin was a master lecturer at Boston University's College of Fine Arts for 25 years. Her background includes 45 years of movement education and performance, as well as training in the Alexander Technique, yoga, meditation, trauma resolution and the broader healing arts. Betsy leads international training where she presents her unique and revolutionary fusion of ideas, scientific knowledge combined with ancient spiritual wisdom and intuitive human creativity.

So, firstly, Betsy, welcome. I'm looking forward to having some time together.

Betsy Polatin

Thank you, Alex. I really appreciate being part of this Trauma Super Conference. It's an important one.

Alex Howard

Yeah, wonderful. So I'd love to start a little bit with some of how you got interested in working with trauma. You're someone that's been working in this field for many years with many of the most respected voices of this world. So I'd love to hear what your pathway was to this work.

Betsy Polatin

Yeah, very indirect, let's put it that way. Not a straight shot, so to speak. When I was younger, I was a dancer and I worked with people about how to move, how to move well, so they don't get injured and things like that. And that led me to the work of the Alexander Technique and helping people to

move through life with easier movement, so to speak. And there's more to it, but for now that's good.

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But what would happen is that somebody would come and say, back pain. I mean, that's probably one of the most common ailments these days. And so I would work with them and teach them to move this way or feel yourself that way, kind of thing. And some people would get better and other people wouldn't. And then I was working with performers, actors and musicians, and at the time I was teaching at Berkeley College of Music, working with singers.

And so I began to work with breath and I thought, oh, yeah, that must be it. So getting breathing going and interacting with how you're moving and breathing. And again, some people got better and other people still had that back pain. And I'm like, what's going on here? And must have been the late 1990s, I read *Waking the Tiger*, Peter Levine's, for those of you who don't know, aren't familiar with it, that's Peter Levine's sort of seminal book on trauma.

And I thought, what? Trauma? Could it be that somebody's back pain as a 35, 40, 50 year old adult having trouble acting or singing or or playing golf or whatever, that back pain was caused by an incident that happened in childhood that locked that pattern in? And so it was like, whoa. And so I was not a trauma person. And it's funny because when I teach with Peter Levine and I talk something like that and I say, I was not a trauma person, Peter jumps in and says, I was a trauma person. He was a trauma person from the start.

And so for me, it was a different story. It was a piece of a puzzle that needed to be and for somebody who, like me, was not particularly interested in trauma now, it's fascinating in how we manage and adjust. So I guess I could leave it at that.

Alex Howard

Yeah, it's interesting. Of course, what you're speaking to there is what we do in response to trauma and how we find the ways to navigate life with that. I know that you talk about an epic journey to an expanded self. I'd love to hear you speak a bit about that. And I think that maybe this is part of that.

Betsy Polatin

Yes, because I want to say many of us, but you can't even say many anymore, it's everybody, life is sometimes difficult, and that's just the way it is. And so that difficulty shows up in the physicality, in our mental thinking, in our emotions and our spirituality. It's across the board. But what we do, often, is we constrict. I constrict to protect myself from what might be coming at me or hiding from this situation, I don't really want to be close to that.

So there's physical constriction or a mental constriction, oh, I'm just not going to think about that. This person said that and you can't think about those kinds of things or family doesn't talk about that, these places where you just don't go. Or, emotionally, when I got angry as a child, nobody liked it. So the emotions get constricted. So much of our experience gets put down or tightened up or hidden. And so the subtitle to my book is *The Epic Journey To Your Expanded Self*.

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And so any moment when you begin to pay attention to those constrictions, there's this awareness or possibility of, oh, there's something else. And so much of us, our lives, we just close those doors. I'm never going to do that again. If I was at school and I said something and they bullied me for it, I'll never say that again. I've closed that door. And yet closing that door closes off other doors also. And so the journey to your expanded self can open some of those doors. And that, like you said before, can shift some of the patterning that gets in place because of the traumatic incidents.

Alex Howard

And it strikes me that that closing off or that closing of doors, one of the things that happens when we do that is we normalize to the consequences of that. It's like we get used to shutting off those potentials for us and potentials in our lives.

Betsy Polatin

Yes.

Alex Howard

Though we often, I guess, don't realize how much we're either limiting ourselves or the suffering that we're creating because we've just become used to things being that way.

Betsy Polatin

Right. And of course, there's the famous story about the fish. These fish are swimming along and another fish comes along and says, how's the water today? And the fish says to the other fish, what's water? It's like, like you say, we adapt. We get used to it. We don't see. But the interesting thing is, I find that even with that, there's something in us that often says, I kind of want to do this, this or that, but I just can't do it. That there's that little voice that questions that normalcy, and so we can start to pay attention to that. Or when you see somebody else doing something and part of you thinks, like, oh, I would like to do that.

Alex Howard

And of course, the other way that can show up sometimes is a lot of judgment of someone doing that thing. Like, it triggers something in us that we want it, but we think we can't have it. And then there's a different reaction.

Betsy Polatin

Absolutely. And that's a clue. I think they say that what you see in other people is something in you. That, like you say, can either awaken or what it can first strike as, I don't like that in that person, or, I like it, but just stir something in us and then we can follow it through.

[00:10:56] Alex Howard

Yeah. Talking of people expanding themselves and sort of opening up to their potentials, I know that a lot of your work over the years has been with actors and actresses and musicians, and I'm curious as to how that came about and also how your work with trauma has fed into that.

Betsy Polatin

Yeah, that's been an interesting one. Again, sort of just happened. As I said, when I was younger, I was a dancer, so I sort of was living in the performance world. But then, as I said, I was teaching the Alexander Technique and somebody from Boston University called me and said, would you like to teach the Alexander Technique to our actors? And I was like, a regular job? That was not what I... I was freelance. I'm kind of a free spirit. I don't really like to be tied down. I taught when I wanted to and didn't teach when I didn't want to, kind of thing.

And this meant I had to be there every... So I said to the director at the time, I said, well, I'll try it for a year and see if I want to do it. So it was interesting because in the class, the turning point for me, it's funny, I haven't thought about this in a while, was I was talking about Alexander's story. Alexander was an actor, and he lost his voice and how he got his voice, but the important part of my story and that story, is that Alexander realized that it was something that he was doing that caused him to lose his voice.

So one of the students in the class said, she raised her hand and said, you know, I never would have thought of that, if I had a problem with my voice, I would say the text isn't good or the hall is not right. I would have blamed everything outside of myself. I never would have looked at myself. And when she said that, I thought, wow, I better teach this work. I better teach young people to pay attention to themselves.

And so the pleasure about working with actors and musicians is that it's instant. Like, somebody plays music and then you work with them or talk them through or have them pay attention to what's happening, and then the whole thing is just totally different. And it's exciting. It's exciting work, dynamic, and it's a different kind of trauma, in a way. It's one of those things that we don't... I don't know if we call it trauma, but it is. Well, I'll tell you, can I tell you a story of somebody?

So I was teaching a group of musicians, so a woman got up and she played the violin. She played a beautiful classical piece. And I said to her afterwards, how was that for you? And she said, I get so anxious when I play that piece. But the thing is, when I watched her play, I saw that when she was playing, she kept looking at the violin, and that's not an uncommon pattern, but this was a little more than common.

So I said, why did you play that piece? She said, I wanted to play it for you because when I play it, I get very anxious. And I said, any reason for that? And she said, well, yeah, I've been playing that piece for more than ten years. And about five or six years ago, I played it for an audition, and things didn't go well. Since then, I've been anxious. So, that's common. That's not unusual. You have a difficult experience in a certain setting, and you're going to be nervous in that setting.

That's fairly common. I mean, we can work through it, but that's common. But there seemed to be something else there. So I said to her, what I noticed is when you were playing that you kept looking at the strings, you didn't look up at all. Let's explore that. So she started to explore that,

and she started to look up a little bit, and she went, ah, and she said, if I look up, all I see is that audition room.

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Even in this moment, six years later, all I see is that. And I said, to her, did you know that? And she said no. So she was looking here to avoid looking out here because she would see that room, but she didn't know she was doing that. So I mean, that's traumatizing... That's a trauma that you don't know about. I mean, the first layer of being anxious about the audition going bad, that kind of trauma we kind of know about. But the holding of that visual to be gifted with seeing that in the moment and the whole thing just changes.

Alex Howard

So in that example, it sounds like just that realization of what was being triggered was enough to shift it.

Betsy Polatin

Yes, it was. Because it was something, again, like fish and water. It's like she just didn't know about... She never thought like, oh, I'm not looking up because if I look up, I will see those people. She never got that far until I said to her, well, let's explore that. You don't even think of something outside, that's early on, the closed doors, the door is so closed, I will never look up because that will be awful. I mean, that to me is like, whoa, it's so interesting.

Alex Howard

Yeah, well, as you were talking I was also just thinking about how a lot of the fears and anxieties that people have around performance or being in front of people, in a sense, it's not so much that moment of being in front of people. What was in my mind was that, in a sense, those core emotional needs that we all have, such as needs for safety and love and so on, it's those wounds, I guess, that are being provoked and triggered. Like the sense that I'm not well received, that means my need for love is not met, which then these are very fundamental core wounds or needs that are there.

Betsy Polatin

Absolutely. And I think you're absolutely right, Alex, in that this was a public class, not public, but it was a group class. But if that woman wanted... In that moment, something did shift for her. But I think you're right in that there would probably be some kind of history of not being seen or some kind of difficulty in that area and some deeper work around it would probably reveal that and be very helpful. Absolutely. Because I think nowadays, especially, all roads lead to the early days, our early environment of holding or, like you say, not holding and safety and love and care.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that there are different motivations that one can have around performance. One of the things I was thinking is that for some performers it's like maybe it was the way they got attention or the way they got recognized or the way they got seen. So there's that piece, which is more of a trauma piece.

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Then there's the place, of course, where it's one's true expression of their authentic self. There's something very pure and very just being real in that and how these different places all then can get stacked on top of each other. And I wonder sometimes that part of it is separating what's trauma from what is just authentic expression.

Betsy Polatin

Absolutely. And that is what, because when I first started teaching both musicians and actors, it was pretty straight Alexander Technique and breath and movement. And then once I trained in somatic experiencing and started working with Peter, more than 20 years ago now, I started bringing that into my work. And the students loved it, in a way, I mean, you don't say you love your trauma work.

Alex Howard

I know what you mean.

Betsy Polatin

Yeah. And it started to sort of, what's the expression, separate the wheat from the chaff. Somebody might be playing an instrument, but their heart isn't in it. So they either do something else or they find a place where their heart is in it. Sometimes things change in that direction, but in actor training, it's interesting that some people will, at that point, continue the actor training and then years later, they will write to me and say they're becoming a lawyer.

Alex Howard

That's the wrong way round, isn't it? Normally a lawyer wants to become an actor.

Betsy Polatin

Right. But the idea is that you use the training that you know how to get up in front of people, like we were talking about before, that you can stand up in front of people and speak and be comfortable in yourself. And also you have acting training. You have a real insight into how people tick, how people move. My second book was called *The Actor's Secret: Transforming Habitual Patterns To Improve Performance*. And so some people would say, oh, I don't really need to read that book. It's for actors.

And my comment is we're all actors. We are all actors. And it's written in the Shakespearean sense, I mean, Shakespeare said it well. All the world's a stage, all the men and women merely players. And so I think with trauma, we are in a role that we can't get out of. And there's a part of me that wants to be able to play another role. I want to be able to be in a relationship or have a job or, you know, something. And yet I'm stuck in this role. And that's, again, so physical. And one of the points of my work is the unity of it all, of us all.

[00:24:19] Alex Howard

One of the things that strikes me as you're talking is that one of the challenges that I often notice with people is that as they do their trauma healing, they find a way of being in more authentic relationship with themselves and there's more contact with themselves. And in particularly safe spaces, with very close friends or perhaps companions on their inner path, they're able to be that authentic self.

But then as they go into perhaps less supportive environments and that can be complex family situations, that can be work environments, it feels too vulnerable to be in that place, but they don't want to get back to the old patterns they used to use. So it's how to be authentic, but not necessarily in environments where we feel the most held and most supported. And yeah, I wonder what you find helps people navigate that, because it feels very similar to what you're speaking about with actors.

Betsy Polatin

Yes. And I think the operative word of what you just said, the operative word is supportive for me, the operative word. And I think at this point, if it's okay with you, I think it might be helpful to talk more about support and do something a little experiential to sort of get what I'm talking about.

Alex Howard

That'd be great.

Betsy Polatin

Yeah. So, support is a major issue for all of us on so many different levels. You have an idea and you tell your friend, oh, this is my idea, and they say, oh, that's stupid. It's like no support. Or they say, like, great idea. Oh, yeah, you should... oh, I'm supported! But one of the supports that, or like you mentioned, early family support, one of the supports that I teach and think is really valuable is the given universal support that's available.

And that is, we live in a gravitational field. And because of that, we need to adapt to the gravitational field. And it's not something that we think about all the time, like, oh, how am I going to stand in this field and manage it? We don't think like that. And yet, there is a part of us that is always sorting that out, like, how am I in my uprightness? Because the system does not want to fall that way.

So what we're looking at is the gravitational force coming toward the planet this way, and then the Earth is spinning, giving off a centrifugal force, something on the planet says this is happening. So we have gravity meeting antigravity, and this is where I meet the planet, and this is where I move through life. So let's explore that for a moment, because this support here, when trauma comes along, that's what we fall off of. That's part of it. We lose that support.

So let's all try something together. So if you're sitting or standing, however you want to try this, if you want to try it standing, you're welcome to. If you want to stay sitting, that's fine, but start with paying attention to whatever is under you. Whatever you're touching that's under you. So your feet are either on the floor or touching the bottom rim of your chair, or whatever they're doing, paying attention to whatever is under you.

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And if you're sitting, your hips are on the chair. And just paying attention to where you meet whatever is under you. And you're welcome to do this with your eyes open, or eyes closed, however it's comfortable for you. And if you're paying attention to your feet, more specifically, the bottoms of your feet, and so you're recognizing the ground is under you. I mean, it's one way or another. We're on the planet, like it or not, we're here and being aware of that.

So you recognize the ground is under you. But what might not be so obvious is that the ground is under you in a supportive way. So what happens in the moment when you recognize the ground is supporting me? And you receive that. So you pay attention to your feet, your ankles. Can my ankles be free enough to receive support? My knees, not held, free enough to receive the support that might want to come through to me? My hip joints. So we have the major joints in your legs receiving from the ground.

Your sitting bones on the chair, your lower torso just a bit less held, open to receive, like that expanded self we were talking about earlier. You might notice a change in breath, you might notice some emotion come up that was held for one reason or another. And they're all good reasons, we know that. And your middle torso supported from the ground. And your upper torso, your ribs, your chest, and that includes your arms. So if your arms are touching something, there's support there. Your arms are supported.

They're not these heavy sort of sausage-like things that drag down that cause shoulder pain. Support from underneath up and through your neck and into your head. We are one unit. Now, very interesting, I noticed, Alex, you lengthened your spine, not because I told you to or somebody said to sit up straight or anything along those lines, but something inside said that. And just being aware of that support. And then when you feel ready, if your eyes are closed, just look around. What does the room look like?

When I'm supported, nothing is stiff, nothing is held, nothing is fixed, nothing couldn't move in the next moment when life called you that way. And in that moment, like we were talking about, the trauma and the heldness has a moment of, oh, something else might be possible, just a bit of a different experience. So maybe, Alex, since you're the one that's here, if you want to... We certainly could see that...

Alex Howard

But the audience couldn't because it was on speaker view, so they could see you and not see me, but it's good that you pointed out what shifted.

Betsy Polatin

Yes.

Alex Howard

And what my experience was was a reminder of, I mentioned before we started recording, the process of moving back into our house and cars being stranded for ten days and dogs running around the office and various things, that the more speedy things get, it feels like there's less

support. And what I realize is that it's not the support that leaves, it's me that leaves, like in that sort of speeding up and that getting kind of frenetic with everything that's going on. And support is not the thing that leaves us. And it's always, for me, an important thing to remember.

[00:33:34] Betsy Polatin

Absolutely. Yeah. And it's also, it's an interesting, very interesting, story about an actor. Actors do this... They make what are called reels, which are a collection of films of different roles that they play. And they give that for an audition. And so this woman was making her reel, and she went to a coach to help her. And so she did a few pieces and he said, okay, the type you are, you are a matriarch type.

So pick pieces that show you as a matriarch and that will be your reel. And then we'll work next week. And in that week, she had her first session with me. And I always teach this support because I think it's really a square one thing. And so the next time she went to the coach next week, she started to do the pieces with the idea of the support and going through what we just did. And it took time in this moment, but you can do it like that.

And so he said, I think I made a mistake. You are not a matriarch type. You are a powerhouse. But again, it's when you come back to that authenticity, your authentic self. So, again, as far as the traumatic history, that powerhouseness was not okay. And it had to be sort of stately held, matriarch looking. But when she found her support and allowed her breath and her move and her dynamicism, if that's a word, you know, to come through, it's an 180 degree change.

Alex Howard

It's like what you're describing is we're actually discovering what our true self, or our true capacity is, by getting closer to it.

Betsy Polatin

I think so. We know that trauma fragments or takes us away or doesn't allow us to be in the present moment circumstances that allow us, that we can respond to. So you can look at it from so many different angles, but it all points to kind of the same thing.

Alex Howard

What's the role of the breath in this? One of the things that people often say is you breathe into your belly. And I noticed in the notes that's not something that you teach. So I'm curious as to how you see the breath in this process.

Betsy Polatin

Yeah, I kind of go against the tide on this one in a certain way. Well, first of all, when we start talking about breath, the first thing is, usually, we're talking about lack of. Very few people come into my studio and say, oh, I have way too much breath. Usually, I don't have enough breath. Or I hold my breath. And again, even holding breath, it's not really holding breath. It's interfering with the breathing cycle.

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Breathing is a cycle. The air comes in, the air goes out. It's a cycle. And we interrupt that cycle for heaven knows, many good reasons. Anytime there's an emotion I don't want to deal with it's like, hold it down. But getting back to the question, it's very common in both the music world and the voice world and the yoga world and the well-being world, to breathe into your belly. It's a common phrase.

But air just doesn't go into your belly. When you breathe, where does your air go? I mean, from high school biology, when you breathe, your air goes into your lungs. That's where air goes. And if you sort of suck it into your belly and bypass filling your lungs. First of all, if air ever did go to your belly, it's over.

Alex Howard

It's a bad situation.

Betsy Polatin

It's a bad situation. It just doesn't go there. Yes, your belly responds, your lungs fill with air, and your torso responds. Your diaphragm moves. Your belly responds. So I'm not saying your belly doesn't move, don't get me that way, but that phrase breathe into your belly, it's just not accurate. And so even now, as you think about breathing, and recognize air goes into your lungs. That's where the air goes.

And then because your lungs are like sort of elastic bags, they move, even if they move a tiny bit. Even if you say, oh, I breathe really shallow, they move, and we're alive. Good thing. And then your ribs sit on top and so your ribs move a little bit. And your shoulders sit on top and so they move a little bit. And your diaphragm is moving, so your belly moves some. So it's a multidimensional activity, and I think it's important to not leave any of those dimensions out. Also front to back. There's a lot of your lung space in your back.

For those of you who go for a yearly checkup, when the Doc, I'm not sure how it is in your part of the world, but in the United States, when you go for a checkup, the Doctor almost always puts that stethoscope first on your back. The bulk tissue of your lungs is in your back. If you were supposed to breathe into your belly, they would put it in your belly to listen. They don't. And again, this is not my thing. My thing is how we're designed. We have a very specific design, and I love to follow that. And I think trauma knocks us out of that a bit. And how can we come back to ourselves with that?

Alex Howard

Yeah, it's beautiful. So, Betsy, I'd love you to say a few words about how people can find out more about you and your work. You've written several books. And there's your book, *Humanual*. Maybe you want to say a few words about that, and also where people can find you online.

Betsy Polatin

Yes, humanual.com is probably the best way. And there's one of those little boxes that says if you want to write to me or something like that. It's info@humanual.com. And they do have a class coming up called infinity breath. That's coming up. And some possible classes. I mentioned that I

do teach with Gabor Maté. He does retreats for SAND, Science and Nonduality, and there's probably one of those coming up. And also I teach with Peter Levine, and some of those will come up, probably not till the fall for now, but yeah, so find me somewhere along the way.

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And Humanual has a lot of information. There's a lot of teachings and things that I've looked into over many years that come together. It's how we develop through evolution and again, more about how we're designed to move and how the unity of body, mind, spirit, self, how we lose it and how to go more in that direction. And, of course, the trauma work. There's lots and lots on that because we all get affected by that.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. Betsy, thank you so much. I really appreciate you and your time today. Thank you.

Betsy Polatin

Yes. Thank you, Alex. And I would say to you, thank you for today, but I also thank you for the work that you're doing in the world, putting on these conferences. It's a lot. And so we really appreciate your efforts to bring these things to light for many people. It's really admirable. And so I tip my hat to you. Thank you.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. Thank you, Betsy. I appreciate that.

Betsy Polatin

Thank you.