



Conscious Life presents

How to Find Meaning in Our Trauma

Guest: Rebecca Fogg

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview. I'm super excited to be talking with Rebecca Fogg. We're going to be exploring how trauma can impact us, also how we can be in relationship with that impact, and how we can find positive meanings even in sometimes the most painful and difficult experiences.

To give you a little bit of Rebecca's background, in 2008 Rebecca Fogg walked away from her New York life and successful career in financial services to move to London, where she co-founded the Institute of Prehospital Care at London's Air Ambulance and continues to work, write and learn Scottish fiddle.

She is the author of *Beautiful Trauma, an Explosion, An Obsession and A New Lease of Life*, which Publishers Weekly held as a searing debut, Fogg's blending of emotional and medical insights delivers an original perspective on the usual recovery arc, this enthralls.

Alex Howard

Firstly, Rebecca, welcome and thank you so much for joining me.

Rebecca Fogg

Thank you so much Alex, I'm delighted to be here.

Alex Howard

I'm really looking forward to getting into this together, and like a lot of people that have come to this work, you've come because of your own story, so I'd love to start there. Walk us through how you came to learn, in your own lived experience, about trauma.

[00:01:42] Rebecca Fogg

In the middle of a very cold night in January of 2006, I was brushing my teeth before bed and the toilet exploded, sending a sharp hunk of porcelain through the inside of my right wrist, partially amputating my dominant hand.

And very long story short, I called 911, I stopped the bleeding, surgeons repaired most of the damage the next day, and after hundreds of hours of occupational therapy, 45 hospital visits, and a lot of distress, I ended up with actually a highly functional hand. It's invisibly quite impaired in some amusing ways, in slightly dangerous ways. But I'm very lucky in the sense that I have really, really good use of the hand now. But it was obviously a really painful experience both physically and psychologically.

Alex Howard

Walk us through a little bit the context within which that happened. How your life was at that time, and then how this experience then changed your direction.

Rebecca Fogg

At that time I was in my late thirties, I was living in Brooklyn, New York. I was working very, very hard at a job in a global financial services firm. I had just been promoted to Vice President several weeks before, was getting to know my new job, my new colleagues. I had a really active social life, lots of friends who were of my family, and just generally very busy. I would say not necessarily focused on meta life, really just grinding through, and that busy all the time, really focused quite on work, and my personal relationships.

Alex Howard

Yeah, it sounds like you were giving your all to life as you knew it, but there wasn't much space for reflection around what that direction was.

Rebecca Fogg

Absolutely. I would say there was space for worry, I was a good worrier. That's how I managed to make sure that bad things didn't happen at work, and fantastic at strategy because I can foresee all the things that could go wrong. It wasn't that I was not thinking at all, but yes, it was very focused on the moment and the way life was, and almost no breathing room.

I did love, and still love, to read, and to participate in culture and things like that. I find that those were probably the smallest windows through which I was experiencing the more existential contemplation. But, yeah, there was just no space at that point in my life, or I wasn't making the space in my life for that sort of contemplation.

Alex Howard

Then you had this experience, obviously there was the physical healing journey, and the 45 hospital visits, and so on that went on. But also this experience then changed the direction of your life. Walk us through how, my sense of that happened in a series of stages as opposed to with one big moment, but walk us through that.

[00:04:55] Rebecca Fogg

Yeah, you're absolutely right that initially all of the focus was on the physical recovery, but from the very beginning I kept a journal during the first six months, essentially like scratching it out with my left hand so it's nearly...

Alex Howard

I was wondering how you wrote the journal.

Rebecca Fogg

Yeah, because immediately it felt like something that was going to be important and life changing, and it was so difficult to understand myself. It's like while I was going through it, it just felt incomprehensible, the words that the doctors were using, this feeling of how could I still be here? And everything looks familiar, but I feel so completely different. I feel broken, I feel alienated.

So right from the beginning I had this sense that I'm going to need to make sense of this. In my journal, I mean, every week it says, I just hope this means something because it was just so hard, it was just so difficult in a way that I had never experienced anything before.

I would say the awareness that this was momentous and would have impact was immediate, but figuring out what it would mean to my life, I would say is ongoing because after a certain point the crisis has passed. But the real work, at least for me, was figuring out integrating this life experience into your worldview, into your understanding, and perhaps most importantly, being able to continue to hope and be optimistic even though, you know, these terrible things can happen.

There was that crisis period, there was the physical recovery, and then I would say it was over subsequent years actually, where I was thinking about this a lot and began to write about it seriously, those were the seeds of the book. Almost the more I wrote about it, the more I discovered there was to understand.

And over the course of time, discovered a contemplative process, got into meditation, and found that the very little that I know about Buddhist teachings resonated a lot. Helping me understand how to be, how simply to be, as opposed to just achieving, surviving, that sort of thing. I would say it went from that intense experience where you have to get through the crisis mode, to really a long, ever continuous period of just learning from it.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I think one of the things that's often very challenging when we go through these kinds of life experiences, is that there's a lot of change in how we think and we feel, and it can feel quite difficult to find ground, if that makes sense. We can have days where we feel really optimistic and we can see the positive, and then other days where it just feels completely hopeless.

In a sense, part of that experience of transformation is that the place that we landed in ourself pre the experience is difficult to land back to. I'm interested in some of those emotional places that you went to and how you helped navigate that changing territory.

[00:08:17] Rebecca Fogg

I would say in the most intense period of recovery, which was really the first three to six months, there was so much grief and loneliness, which I think surprised me. I'm still understanding what was that grief? Perhaps it's in a sense a loss of innocence these things can happen, although really I'd always known that.

Just that sense of grief, anxiety, loneliness, alienation, being foreign to yourself, those were a lot of the really intense feelings. There was a period of that, but actually juxtaposed with the gratitude, and knowledge of my good fortune, and having friends and family who would step in and help. Not just friends and family, colleagues, neighbors, strangers. What I talk about is the beauty of the experience.

To be clear, I don't believe there's beauty in every trauma, absolutely not. But I saw it in mine, in terms of my passion for medical science, and it turned me into a writer. These alternating experiences were that pain of trauma as it felt to me, as well as the gratitude, the joy, the love. Then later on, I think the intense, difficult emotions have definitely subsided a lot.

Now there's some difficult emotions in understanding maybe why the experience felt that way to me, understanding what it was about. One's response to trauma, one's experience of trauma is driven by biological factors, psychological factors, socio-environmental factors, and actually many of them are beyond our knowledge or control.

But what I have learned to understand about mine, there are circumstances of my environment, and my worldview, and growing up and everything that I think contributed to some of my difficult emotions. I sometimes feel grief when I recognize that. When I recognize experiences that might have made this one harder for me, or when I think about other people that I let down, because I simply didn't understand enough what they were going through, or recognize what I was going through.

I think it's a mix of difficult and pleasant emotions and they're really intertwined, some of them you just can't have one without the other. Perhaps one of the things I've learned best to appreciate is this experience, I would say coupled with COVID, really knocked the expectation out of me, that you can control what happens, and that you can just rebound at will from anything.

It's made me accept impermanence more, and be able to, I'd say, see the tensions and subtleties in things, and not be quite as distressed about them as I might have been.

Alex Howard

I want to come back in a little bit to some of the inner journey, and some of the meaning making from the experience. I'd also love to touch on, you mentioned bio, psycho, social elements of the experience. I know that part of your journey was to embrace your love of science, and to use that lens through which to understand your experience. Share a bit about that.

Rebecca Fogg

This was a really unexpected and wonderful outcome of the accident. In the days following the accident, nobody could really tell me what was going to happen next. Even the doctors couldn't

reassure me that I would have a useful hand, because so much could still go wrong in the healing process that it would have just been irresponsible to predict.

[00:12:23]

That unknowing was very difficult, and I by chance, met an acquaintance who had also gone through a life threatening experience injury. And he said that I should study the anatomy of the hand, because he said if I understand what it's trying to do in healing, then when it achieves some milestone, I'll understand just how hard it worked there, and be really happy.

But when it's progressing slowly or not at all, I'll understand why, and I won't be so demoralized. And he was absolutely right, it had all of those effects. But I think what neither of us expected is that it ignited an insatiable curiosity about all of the science underpinning my accident and my injury. I ended up getting into reconstructive surgery, neuroscience, and psychology, and ultimately it all leads to philosophy.

I got a lot of things out of that. First of all, just practically speaking, it was a sense of purpose and achievement at a time when I was really dependent on other people. There was so little I could do for myself, I had a useless hand, my mind was muddled with medication and trauma, I was in pain, but I could study and I could learn. I also think it helped me connect better with my clinicians.

On top of that, I would say more existentially, just understanding that all of the difficult emotions that I was feeling were completely normal, really helped me feel less broken and alone. Then learning all of the ways that the body is continually trying to help us survive and thrive. I just found them so astonishing and hopeful that it made me more optimistic, and that was really important.

Alex Howard

It's interesting because I think sometimes our reaction can be when we have physical or emotional injury, is that people don't want to understand what's happening because the fear is that it's going to create more anxiety. Like it's going to give them more things that they can become concerned about. I think it's a really interesting and helpful message that actually that knowledge, and that understanding can actually be used in an empowering way.

Rebecca Fogg

Absolutely. I would always say again people's experience and response to trauma is going to be different, and what they need will be different. But absolutely consider it because you might be surprised by what you find. Really it made me feel less alone, even when I felt so incapacitated and unable to help myself, there were processes that were continuing without me knowing anything about them, and I found that very hopeful.

I would absolutely encourage people to give it a try, see if it works for them. The other thing is too, it can help you understand maybe what's happening in your interactions with healthcare professionals better, and anytime you better understand what's going on, and can better participate in decisions that are being made, that's important.

[00:15:49] Alex Howard

One of the things that also you touched on, which I'm interested to explore as well, is that there's the experience that happens, but there's also the history, the background, the context within which that experience happens.

For example, you mentioned around your own personal journey then allowed you to understand other people's traumas in different ways. I'm interested to understand how you see that role of context, and environment, and history in how we then respond to a traumatic event.

Rebecca Fogg

In my research I studied a lot about both post traumatic stress disorder as well as resilience. And these are all incredibly complex subjects, and I'm not an expert speaking from the position as a physician, or a scientist. However, what I did learn is that for instance, resilience is correlated with things like aptitude and problem solving. You can imagine that makes sense because traumas crises create problems.

If you are experienced in solving problems then there are going to be certain aspects of the situation that you might be able to resolve, or with help. In terms of my background and context, I have an MBA that is an entire degree based on problem solving.

Resilience is also correlated with education level and that also, as I understand it, makes sense because again education is about problem solving, among other things. It's also correlated with socio-economic level and that sort of thing.

All of this is what I call the meta tragedy around tragedy and trauma, is that everybody deserves to be financially secure, and to have the education that they need to thrive, and all of that. But when people are deprived of these things, it can actually make it harder for them to come through a crisis or cope with adversity in a resilient way.

I think one of my biggest learnings was that I think the cultural narrative is very much around rebounding, and you got this, and almost as if it's personal character and will that solely determine resilience. And it is really so many different factors, and I think we need to have compassion for that, not judge that, not judge ourselves or others when our response isn't what we would expect, or hope, or we're finding it more difficult than we think it should be.

I saw a lot of correlations between my life, and things that I was fortunate to have had experienced which prepared me for this. At the same time, it was traumatic to me, so there are probably reasons that I will never know that it was. But I also know, for instance, I was at ground zero in 911 so that was another experience, I was in the office next door.

There were certainly experiences I've had in my life that make the fear of being alone in a crisis very intense, and so that probably also informed my response to this. I was living alone at the time, so after my family of origin jumped in and did absolutely everything for three weeks, then I had to sort out my own care, and I wasn't ready to care for myself. That was a very frightening experience for me. And these are layers upon layers of life experience that end up being intertwined and expressing themselves in a particular way when we meet challenge.

[00:19:56] Alex Howard

I'd love to explore this theme around, I know it's called different things, resilience, post traumatic growth and so on, because... You touched on it, I think one of the issues can be that people tend to think about it being a binary thing. That there's either a place where it feels hopeless and there isn't any meaning, or there's a place where there's lots of positive meaning. Certainly my experience of going through difficult life experiences is that it seems to be a needle that moves back and forth quite quickly in any given day, week or moment thing.

Rebecca Fogg

That's absolutely my experience and that is consistent with what I've learned through my research. It's life, and it is complex, and there are things that we won't understand until later. There are things that we don't understand until another experience highlights them for us. I think it's a range of experiences.

Definitely, I agree with you, I think that binary approach is really unhelpful. I referred to it earlier though, you got this, this notion that there's a beginning and an end to it, that you'll get through it, you'll get past this. And also by the way, that it's all up to you.

People very often ask me, what's my advice to other people experiencing adversity or trauma? I understand that that question comes from a place of compassion, but it frustrates me because again, we are all experiencing something completely different. What works for me isn't going to necessarily work for somebody else.

When we are traumatized or going through a really difficult time, that might be when we are actually least able to help ourselves. I really wish that we could tilt the conversation about resilience away from this binary, you're going to get through, and it's going to be you who does it, to more of, it is a process, it can be a lifelong process of just integrating the experience into your worldview.

It would be wonderful if when we personally are feeling in a moment of emotional and psychological well-being, that we could challenge ourselves to look around us, and see who needs help before they have to ask. Rather than placing this massive expectation on people, that just when you need help the most, well, you're supposed to be bootstrapping yourself out of it. That's not realistic.

Alex Howard

One of the things that I found myself thinking about is the psychological term of locus of control. That the idea that we can influence, not necessarily the ultimate outcome, but we can influence the journey, and the direction that we're moving in. It struck me, as you were talking, that some of your previous career background and the way that you approach, let's understand the science, and let's see this as an opportunity to grow.

You mentioned some of the factors that influence that, for example, education, socio-economic background and so on. I'm wondering, for someone that's watching this interview, and they're feeling like that's an area that there's an opportunity for them to move forward, to have more of not necessarily to influence the ultimate outcome, but the way they meet the journey. And what are some of the things that can help them develop that?

[00:23:40] Rebecca Fogg

That's a really good question. I will share what has worked for me and what I've learned through, for instance, meditation and therapy, and things like that.

First of all, trying to identify how you're feeling, and accepting that those feelings are acceptable. That whatever you're feeling is natural and normal. I think that that is a really important place to start because trauma can feel very destabilizing. And in a culture where independence is so highly valued, and this notion of being able to control it, and propel yourself out of it is so strong. There can be shame associated with feeling vulnerable, and that's not helpful, and it's not fair really.

I think it's first try to identify how you're feeling and accept that those feelings are natural, and try to have some compassion for yourself. And if it's hard to do that, think about a friend, or a loved one that you have comforted in a time of need, and how you would want to treat them, and you treat yourself that way.

Another thing to do is again when you are in a really difficult situation, it can be really hard to have these positive thoughts. But understand that you can have influence. Recognizing that the outcome isn't determined, nobody knows what's going to happen next. Even when maybe your mind and body are telling you that you will never have a positive feeling again, or you will never be able to do anything else for yourself again, recognize that there are probably aspects of your experience that are not determined.

I think it's recognizing impermanence, recognizing that nobody knows for sure. This is contrary to there may be discussions you've had with a physician about certain physical aspects, et cetera, but in terms of whether you'll survive and thrive emotionally later, that hasn't been determined.

So there's possibility, and then very practical things, even if the first two are really, really hard. Again, ask for help. It can be really difficult in our society, but people want to help. I mean, I was astonished, literally strangers, neighbors, colleagues, people do want to help.

So ask whether it's somebody who can just listen non-judgmentally to how you're feeling, someone who's been through this experience before. Patient forums are fantastic. When I was recovering, I read loads, and loads, and loads of memoirs of all different kinds of medical catastrophes and traumas and I'm smiling, but they were really grueling at times.

But just reading the stories, everybody's story matters, and reading those stories of how they got through the day-to-day, how they got through those days when they didn't feel like there was anything that would change for the better. Some days they couldn't do anything for themselves, other days they could. That was really important. Asking for help, learning other people's stories, being witnessed, I think those are all really important things.

I did want to make one note on the correlations with resilience. Those things are not all things associated with good fortune and privilege, education, sociology. There's also people with a spiritual belief, so that isn't necessarily a particular god or a religion, but just people with a spiritual practice. People with confidence in problem-solving, people who see opportunity. There are some things about mindset which can be cultivated, they aren't just products of being born in a very helpful place and time.

[00:28:01] Alex Howard

I want to explore more this piece around how we show up for each other, because you made the point a little bit earlier around sometimes the expectation that can be placed upon people that are going through a difficult experience. You mentioned it in your story that after that initial three weeks of everyone comes in and responds, and then people go, right, Rebecca's got this, right we can...

It's not just what happens, but it's also what happens around us, in what happens. I'm really curious as to how we ask for that help, but also how we can identify when others are in need, and how we can best be of service to each other?

Rebecca Fogg

In my situation, it was family of origin that stepped in for the first few weeks, and living in different states, and all of that, coming in, so they couldn't stay forever, et cetera. After that it was my therapist, fortunately I was in therapy at the time, who had suggested that I ask my friends to set up a visiting schedule. That seems like the most natural thing in the world to me now, but it literally did not occur to me that I could ask for that much help.

And of course when I asked my best friend to set it up, she immediately thought it was a brilliant idea. There were way too many people who wanted to help versus what I felt I could handle. I think it's just trying to change our habit of thought to what can I do for myself, to what can I ask somebody to do with me? Or for me? People like to help, and it makes us feel stronger, it makes us feel joyful.

I think that that's just trying to get over this notion... Aspects of independence can be wonderful, I love to learn how to do DIY, it's nice to learn things, it's nice to achieve something. But there shouldn't be any shame around asking for help. And there's certainly no medals given for not asking for help. That's one thing.

In terms of being able to better recognize help, I think a lot of that just comes from life experience. The more we've been through, the more we can empathize, and perhaps imagine what might be going on that isn't said.

Then the other thing is too, just overcoming, I think there's also some social reticence, perhaps, again, because the premium that we place on independence. There's some social reticence to asking if someone needs help, or just giving it to them whether they ask for it or not. I had people literally say, I'm bringing you dinner tonight, or slipping notes under the door saying, you don't know me, I'm on the third floor, apartment D, but if you need anything, please knock on the door. I was going and knocking on doors and being like, can you open this peanut butter jar, and can someone pick up this prescription for me?

Alex Howard

I'm also sorry to interrupt you, but I laugh because, particularly the image that I have of New York being a little bit like London, that people can live in apartment blocks and never meet their neighbors. Something really beautiful about the opportunity to be of service to someone in such a simple way like opening a jar, but actually in a really meaningful way. I wonder what that did for your sense of community and connection?

[00:31:55] Rebecca Fogg

Huge. It was just if the accident itself reinforced the fact that life is risky... All of these many, many situations, I could go on all day about situations where people I didn't know very well, or complete strangers stepped in and did something. And they just completely reinforced the fact that people want to help. People are kind, you need to give them a chance to.

You talk about the cultures of New York and London. I've lived in London for 15 years now and I get it, but I find so often that veneer of, get out of my way, I'm on my way to work, or whatever, or even just the polite reticence and I'm not going to get into your space, et cetera. It really is just the surface.

Someone comes walking toward you in the street with a stony face, catch their eye and give them a giant smile, nine times out of ten they're going to smile back. So that knocking on the door, hey, could you help me? I think is much more likely to be met with a positive response. The other thing is, whenever you ask for help, you're giving other people permission to do the same.

You are modeling this behavior that we need to help society be more connected. I think at our base we all want that. So whenever you ask for help, you're not being weak, you are modeling the behavior that's going to help everybody live better.

Alex Howard

I really like challenging those cultural boundaries in London where people don't talk to each other, because once people realize you're not going to murder them, or steal all their money, people really like to connect. And it's like particularly connecting to people that are normally invisible, like the people cleaning the street, or tending the communal garden, and just go up and say, wow, this looks really beautiful, thank you so much for doing it. Under that surface we all want to feel connected. And it's beautiful how this experience was in a way a gateway to have those connections.

Rebecca Fogg

Absolutely. I met so many people that I never would have met any other way. There was a whole community at the hospital of people who we'd all gone through these horrendous accidents, and we're showing each other scars and wounds, and talking about it and everything.

This very deep and beautiful connection of just I'll never know exactly what it's like for you, but I think I know what it's like to feel lost, to feel broken, and then to feel that connection. That connection alone in a time of need can be so healing. That's something that we can help each other too.

Alex Howard

You called your book *Beautiful Trauma* and I know you mentioned it a few times, I know that you're not imposing that idea on different people's experiences, but I'm really curious as to how that title came to you, and what that really means to you.

[00:35:28] Rebecca Fogg

It came to me just in reflecting on what the experience meant to me and continues to mean to me. As I'd mentioned before, in my journal from the moment it happened, I just knew it was going to be a formative experience. It was so difficult initially that I just was hoping that it would mean something good somehow.

And as the distance increased between me and that crisis period of three to six months after the accident, I could do a more clear eyed, I think assessment is a strong word for it, but it was emerging what I had got out of it. A lot of change came out of it, I really do think of my life as before and after. I was living a good life before, but after I did a hard think about whether I wanted to continue exactly on the same path, and the answer was no.

I wanted to rebuild a life that was more in keeping with my values, that there was more time for that contemplation, more time for just experiencing life and helping one another. I ended up working in healthcare for quite a while. I ended up reading the book excuse me, writing the book.

Alex Howard

I'm guessing you read it as well.

Rebecca Fogg

It's so muddled now I can't tell the difference between reading and writing, I could probably recite it.

It was in reflecting periodically on what this has meant to me, where I just saw so many positives that could not have transpired if this most awful thing hadn't happened, and that this beauty was intrinsically linked with this trauma. I really was surprised by this coexistence, I was encouraged by the coexistence.

Obviously difficult things still happen, there was COVID and all of that, but it had stuck with me that even when the worst thing happens, there is a possibility it won't necessarily lead to any positives. But there is a possibility, and I wanted the title to reflect that possible coexistence.

Alex Howard

That's beautiful. Rebecca, if people want to find out more about you and your work, I know there'll be below the video, there's a link tree with various links that people can find, but say a bit more about what you're up to now. Obviously people can also find the book as well.

Rebecca Fogg

Sure. Well, I continue to work in strategy and operations. I find that analytical side of my brain, it's very rewarding, it's the problem solving, I've always enjoyed that.

I also continue to write, and I really do feel a passion for exploring these existential questions and broad human experience in writing, and I will continue to do that. Please do look out for that. The paperback of *Beautiful Trauma* comes out pretty soon, and other than that, I think it's really I continue to volunteer, and to be engaged in discussions of trauma and resilience. I really hope that

this book will help people through difficult experiences, and perhaps give them some joy of discovery.

[00:39:07] Alex Howard

Yeah. Beautiful. Rebecca, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

Rebecca Fogg

Thank you for having me. It was a wonderful discussion.