

## TRANSCRIPT

### *Spirituality & Health's Essential Conversations*

LYANDA LYNN HAUPT

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**Rabbi Rami:** From *Spirituality & Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is *Essential Conversations*. Our guest today, Lyanda Lynn Haupt, is an eco-philosopher, naturalist, and author of six books, including *Mozart's Starling*, and *Rare Encounters with Ordinary Birds*, both of which won the Washington State Book Award, and *Crow Planet: Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness*, which won the Sigurd F. Holden Natural Writing Award. Her newest book; *Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature, and Spirit*, is reviewed in the May/June issue of *Spirituality & Health Magazine*. Lyanda Lynn Haupt, welcome to *Essential Conversations*.

**Lyanda Lynn Haupt:** I am delighted to be here, Rabbi Rami. Thank you for having me.

**Rabbi Rami:** Oh, it's my pleasure. I really enjoyed this book. People who hear this will say, "Well, he almost always says that." [laughs] I really did. There's so much in here that we won't be able to get to, but I think the next 20 minutes to half an hour is going to be very rich for everyone listening, and hopefully will encourage them to go and get a copy of the book for themselves. I wanted to start this way, maybe it's just me, but I doubt it, but it seems to me that despite all the negativity shrouding our world, your book *Rooted* is deeply optimistic.

I'm going to quote from the book, you write that, "As perilous and complex as these times are, we are armed with a rare trio of tools that offers a rooted way forward; the joining of nature, spirit, and uniquely modern science." Now, I'm going to just read it one more time, "As perilous and complex as these times are, we are armed with a rare trio of tools that offers a rooted way forward, the joining of nature, spirit, and uniquely modern science." Can you unpack this for us? Tell us what these three tools are?

**Lyanda:** Thank you. That is a nutshell summary of, the subtitle of the book in a way, science, nature, and spirit. To be honest, I was surprised to hear you say that you've found the book optimistic because one of the things that I strive for in the writing of this book, or was striving for, and one of the things I was feeling while writing was a great deal of uncertainty. I honestly still dwell in uncertainty in terms of what is going to unfold, in terms of the ecological crisis that's facing us all. I do think that we are in a unique position. I started thinking about it a little bit differently when the science of forest bathing began to be trendy here in the United States, some years back.

I think that most of your listeners have heard about forest bathing, but is it okay if I just do a little refresher on that?

**Rabbi Rami:** Yes, sure.

**Lyanda:** In the 1980s, in Japan, therapists and some healthcare practitioners began to actually prescribe walking in nature and being in the natural world for clients and patients who were suffering stress-related issues, whether anxiety or physiological issues associated with stress. Soon, people in the scientific community came along and said, "If you're going to be prescribing this stuff, we really need evidence-based research." That began to come out in the '80s from Chiba University, people began to find that when we were in the natural world, our heart rate balanced, our blood pressure went down.

The activity and the hemoglobin in our prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain associated with emotional wellbeing and actually creativity, and the activation of our parasympathetic nervous system, that part of our nervous system associated with making us calm. All these wonderful stress-reducing side effects came out of being in the natural world. Now suddenly, there was that evidence that supports this conclusion now. When that science made it to the United States, we did here, what we do best in the United States, we made it into an industry [laughs] where people could, for a fee, become forest therapists, which is lovely.

Bringing people out into nature, where people could pay to go on walks, where they were guided through meditative pathways that would help them access their senses and calming. That was the result that encompassed those scientific results. This is what I'm getting to, I was thinking about all of that and I thought, "Wow, there's this beautiful science, people were so excited about it." This was huge news. Part of me thought, "How wonderful that this continuity that we have with our bodies, and the rest of the natural world is being validated in this way."

Part of me was a little bit hesitant and I thought, "We already knew this for millennia." Mystics and poets, and Earth-based indigenous cultures, and children have known that we are at our healthiest, and our wisest, and our most creative, and in our most embodied sense of wellness when we are connected to the natural world and living within that continuity.

That's what I wanted to explore, it's that intersection. I think that people have been aware of that sensibility, but for so many who don't know, or have experienced the direct communication with the natural world, or are uncomfortable with spiritual language, this science offers validation and legitimacy that is very welcome.

I want to honor that and celebrate that while at the same time saying, "Wow, we also have this innate knowing of our human connection with nature."

**Rabbi Rami:** Absolutely. That reminds me of something else you wrote in the book, you'll see if you can make it fit, but it seems to be a fit for me. You talked about-- and this obviously stuck in my mind because the Bible is my passion, but you're writing in the book about the first commandment given to Moses by God in the parable of the burning bush, where God says to Moses, "Shed your sandals," that's the way you write it, "Shed your sandals, you're standing on holy ground." Your interpretation, I thought, was just fascinating. You wrote that "Moses might shed his shoes, not because the Earth is holy but in order for him to realize that the Earth is holy."

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That there's something between us and the direct experience of the world around and within us that keeps us from what you were just talking about, this mystical sense of, and you actually refer to Thích Nhất Hạnh's notion of interbeing, of the interconnectedness of all things. What do you think we have to shed in order to experience this?

**Lyanda:** Thank you for asking that, Rabbi Rami. That was a really important question for me because I heard Trappist Brother David Steindl-Rast, who you surely know. It was in an interview with him that I heard this verb, shed, because so often we hear that passage translated as the burning bush told Moses to take off his shoes. Just like we had taken off when we come in the door, and we don't want to get the carpet dirty. He pointed out that the original verb is far more radical, shed, is to cast off. It speaks to transformative moments, the great transition of animals, deer's shed their antlers.

Antlers, when we find them, they're just these dead things but in actuality, when they're on the deer, they're in organ, they're innervated, they are a living thing. Snakes shed their skin; animals slough their fur. Honestly, I thought, "What does this mean?" I wrote it at the top of the page of my notebook, "What do we shed?" I was glad you asked me that because I thought about it a lot. I think in this time, that requires us to be of service to an Earth in crisis. We shed a sense of otherness. When our feet are bound in shoes sometimes, which is wonderful for comfort and for safety and for beauty, sometimes, but when we take off our shoes, we let that go.

We shed our otherness, our separateness from the world, our elevation, our pretense. We shed a certain kind of beauty, a certain kind of comfort, I would say the certainty of comfort. We let all of these things go in order to become in deeper relationship, and as you said, to recognize, not just-- we're not doing this, we're not seeking this deeper contact, because the ground is holy, though it is, but to come into the deepest recognition that we can. That we are always standing on holy ground.

**Rabbi Rami:** There's this necessity, and I would say all authentic spirituality, of a stripping away of every that that's keeping us from having this experience as opposed to having to find something we lack. The real work is to shed what's in the way of what we already have. One of the ways we can practice shedding, I think this is safe to say, is through voluntary solitude. I'm thinking about all the people I know who are in involuntary solitude because of COVID-19, and they're just coming out of that solitude. Some of the people I know who have gone through this have found the experience to be deeply spiritual in the sense that you were just talking, that somehow not having to put on the masks.

I'm obviously playing with the word here, but the social masks. You can put on your COVID mask, but you don't have to put on the various social masks because you're not out in social settings, that not having to put those on is, in a sense, the same as taking the sandals off or shedding the sandals, and they found that solitude a very enriching experience.

Now that we can go back, or many of us, once you get vaccinated, you can go back, I think a lot of the people that I've talked to are just racing away from solitude. They just want to put those masks on because they've had it.

You write that, while solitude is vital to our sanity, but you say that seeking that path to sanity through solitude takes us into what you call is "A teeming shivering anxiety." I'm wondering, A, why that might be. If that anxiety is what keeps us from seeking solitude as an ongoing practice. I don't mean isolate, you're not becoming a hermit, but making the seeking of solitude a regular part of your spiritual life. Is it that anxiety? If it is, what do you do with it when it comes?

**Lyanda:** I think you make an important distinction, Rabbi Rami, about voluntarily choosing solitude because prisoners are isolated. Even, during the pandemic, the isolation and solitude that many of us experienced was in a way of voluntary because we could pick up the phone and we could find community in different ways. When we look at solitude, in the positive spiritual sense, we're looking at choosing it or when it's a cultural practice of certain spiritual traditions, quest, or a time in wilderness or desert. That's something we don't get to do very often. You're right, we create, we create, and seek our own times of solitude for a different kind of sustenance.

Studies show that 85% of us are longing for more solitude, but at the same time, it's one of our greatest fears. I experienced that myself. I seek solitude, one of my regular spiritual practices is extended periods of time away. I always fall into a period of really hard anxiety. There are studies that show that when we are in solitude, obviously, the distractions of our cell phones fall away, the distractions of mindless conversation and everyday tasks, but one of the other things that falls away is our sense of being seen by others. Psychiatrists call this the spotlight effect, where we become very aware of what we say, and what we do, and how we present.

That's magnified even more now when we have social media, where we're supposed to curate our lives in a way that makes them look really good. When all that falls away, a lot of things happen. We let these sort of self-referential processes go. We recall memories and emotional states and feelings, and we have a lot more expansive time to dwell in and kind of evaluate sensory input. It makes us nutty and it's hard.

It turns out there's so much going on in our brain that we do not allow to surface, that does not have the space to surface in the busyness and the interactions are our everyday lives. That's hard. It creates anxiety. It creates what Emily Dickinson, a famous solitary, called the Divine Insanity and she capitalized both words.

**Rabbi Rami:** When you experienced that, what advice do you have for people to move through it or at least sit with it?

**Lyanda:** Well, it's temporary, one thing. It's something that, I think, we pass through because solitude is a shock to our system. For a while, we're just so happy, think we're alone, everything's quiet, we can watch the birds, but then that anxiety sets in. I personally do a couple of things, I talk myself down. I remind myself that I've been through it before. I remind myself that it passes. I remind myself that wherever I'm

seeking solitude, whether it's an hour in my study or several days in the wilderness, I remind myself that I came there on purpose, that I came there to pass through something, and here I am passing through it. Although it feels scary that I'm safe, and that's basically it. Then I let it happen.

I think that we rush so often to grasp. We grasp after stillness and tranquillity. [laughs] I know that we seek that in so many spiritual practices, but there's a sense in which that can-- and Joanna Macy said this, she said that this can become a kind of spiritual trap, where we think that one a state of being is higher than another, and so we grasp after that. It's just another form of grasping when sometimes we're just anxious. Oftentimes, we rush to say, "Things are dark right now, things are hard right now, I'm anxious right now," and that's okay. Sometimes, I just want to leave that, "and that's okay part" off, and say sometimes, just anxious, just there.

**Rabbi Rami:** Well, feelings aren't permanent, they're always in transition. If you wait long enough, you'll feel something else. It might not be any better, but it's at least something else.

**Lyanda:** I will add that after periods of solitude, I always find-- I have never emerged without passing through that time of anxiety and coming into a kind of stillness and a bareness that informs my life in a way that I find meaningful and positive.

**Rabbi Rami:** If you're going to use the notion of bareness, that takes you back to shedding your sandals. It's that nakedness. I think Richard Rohr talks about the *Naked Now*. It's that kind of vulnerability, which turns out to be maybe our ultimate strength, just being without defenses. In your writing about solitude, you talk about the work of Dr. Marcus Riley. I'm wondering if you can explain a little bit about his work and how that reinforces your own understanding of solitude.

**Lyanda:** Some of what I was just referring to comes from Dr. Ricley's work. One of the things that I discovered in his work, which was a surprise is something that we always hear over and over again, that we're just using a very small part of our brain. Have you heard that? I just thought that we have.

**Rabbi Rami:** I know it's true about me.

**Lyanda:** [laughs] It sounds like we have so much brain capacity that we're not engaging and what Dr. Ricley's research showed in the 90s, from Washington University, is that actually, our brains are very active, they're functioning at about 95% all the time. Part of that is the social interaction and the kind of pretense that we've been talking about, and the sort of maintenance of a social image. He says, when all of those things drop away, in solitude, our brainscape is allowed to roam free. Then we do have that kind of naked space. That's what leads to just that very unsettled, unfamiliar sense of your word was vulnerability, and I thought that was a lovely word. That's one of the many things that his research has brought to light.

**Rabbi Rami:** In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus says, I'm just paraphrasing, I thought about this talk just now but Jesus says something like, "Do not cease seeking until you find, and when you find, you will be troubled. When you're troubled, you will reign over all." I think that one, maybe Marvin Meyers translation, but it's the first

part, "Don't stop seeking until you find and when you find, you will be troubled." Maybe what he's talking about is we want either that canned notion of tranquillity or bliss, or we don't really want to take-- or maybe we did take our sandals off but we buy another pair right away that look a little nicer or something for an Instagram photo. We're not necessarily desiring that kind of Richard Rohr *Naked Now* moment, and that's why we're trouble. If we can move through that, we find this incredible sense of power. Not power over, but power with, in that Thích Nhất Hạnh's sense of we're interconnected inter-being. I wonder if, you have this-- you refer to what I'm calling a parallel to solitude, but maybe it's actually just part of the same thing. You call the reader to 'return to a fruitful darkness,' that's your phrase, 'return to a fruitful darkness.'

I'm wondering if that too is part of what you're talking about. One aspect is solitude and this other aspect is darkness, both of which are anxiety-producing for lots of people because we tend to equate darkness with evil, but you give us a different understanding of that. How do you understand this notion of fruitful darkness?

**Lyanda:** I want to acknowledge that I got that pairing of words from Roshi Joan Halifax's book by that name, *Fruitful Darkness*. I love those words together. One of the things that I did in writing this book, Rabbi Rami, is I chose not to use the metaphor of darkness to be equated with evil or trouble or anything bad, which we do over and over. We hear it in our political punditry or even just our everyday conversation. "How are you doing?" "It's a dark time?" I was so surprised at how difficult it was to excise that language from my writing. I plopped it in over and over again, and I crossed it out over and over again, and I hope I got all of them.

In our cultural mythology, in our hymns, in our books, over and over again, darkness is equated with evil. I just thought, "Wow, if that's true, we're in a lot of trouble because 90% of life on this planet dwells in complete darkness. The depths of the sea where light cannot penetrate, beneath the earth it's where the decompose is, both animal and fungal are toiling to return death to life. That's the great spinning of life. Also in darkness, again, we come back to the idea of shedding. Our appearance doesn't matter. We don't have the bearings that we have in daylight. There is this essential and yet somehow comforting unsettledness.

Darkness gives us bad dreams, but it also gives us beautiful dreams. It gives us a space in which we find our sweet. It gives us starlight. I just think that I want to-- one of the things I wanted to do with this book and that chapter was-- one of the pivotal ways of doing it was to dismantle a lot of dualities, human and nature being one of them, the separation of human culture from wild nature, which is an impossible separation. That somehow the duality of good and evil being equated with the dark and light and others. That was the starting point.

**Rabbi Rami:** In Genesis, to go back because your reference said earlier, in Genesis, in the opening line of creation, darkness precedes light. Darkness is the darkness of the womb. We get the notion of the Black Madonna, not just Mary as the mother of Jesus, but the virgin, as Theotokos, the Mother of God. She's, In many cases, she's Black. The woman in the *Song of Songs* tells us she's Black. Most translators say, "I'm Black but beautiful," but that's not necessarily what the Hebrew says. "I'm Black

and beautiful." That there's a beauty to the blackness, a fruitfulness, to the darkness, all of that.

I really appreciated the way you let us through that in the book, as well as just a moment ago, to really challenge our cultural biases around this notion of darkness. We are running out of time. I want to close. I mentioned this to you before we started recording, so you're ready to do this. I love the way the book *Rooted* closes. If it's okay with you, I'd like you to read the last few paragraphs of the book.

**Lyanda:** Thank you. "My grown-up vision of Earth and grace remains influenced by a line from the creed I recited weekly as a child at St. Anthony's Catholic Church in the mercurial green Pacific Northwest. "I believe in the seen and the unseen." I remember standing there like a tree amidst the pews, not knowing the science yet, but knowing something true, the seen. My arms and hair flew into the air as branches, clothed with mosses and lichens, crawling with shiny black beetles covered with birds, rustling in the slightest breeze. Wet, sometimes with rain, with dewfall, and the unseen.

Roots shot through the soles of my patent leather Mary Jane's and into the dark Earth where they knit with other roots. Rounded, ancient stones, wove with worms and grabs and bodies of furred and feathered returning to soil. All mingling mercilessly gloriously and always. All shall be well in whatever tangled unknowable difficult, beautiful way that wellness unfolds. Our lives are irrevocably entwined with this unfurling that we can't know exactly where we are going or what will happen. Still, we journey together by choice and in grace, foot by foot, upon our troubled and beloved Earth. Return, return, return."

**Rabbi Rami:** Our guest today, Lyanda Lynn Haupt is the author of *Rooted: Life at the Crossroads of Science, Nature, and Spirit*. Kate Martin Lee reviews the book in the May/June issue of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. You can learn more about Lyanda's work on her website [lyandalynnhaupt.com](http://lyandalynnhaupt.com). Lyanda, this was really fabulous. I hope this motivates a bunch of people to get into solitude and to try out the fruitful darkness and not be afraid of all of that, and pick up a copy of your book and read it. Thank you very much for talking with us on *Essential Conversations*.

**Lyanda:** Thank you, Rabbi Rami. It was such a pleasure to be here with you.

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**Rabbi Rami:** *Essential Conversations* with Rabbi Rami is the bi-weekly podcast of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. If you like *Essential Conversations*, please rate and review us on Apple Podcast and subscribe to the show on your preferred podcast app. You can also follow me on the *Spirituality and Health* website, where I now write a regular column called Roadside Musings. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. *Essential Conversations* is produced by Ezra Bakker Trupiano, and our executive producer is Kathryn Drury Wagner. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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