

TRANSCRIPT

Spirituality & Health Podcast

Morgan Harper Nichols

Rami: From the *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, I'm Rabbi Rami, and this is the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*. Our guest today, Morgan Harper Nichols, is an artist, designer, and poet, whose work has been featured in such places as Target, Starbucks, Anthropologie, Athleta, Aerie, Barnes & Noble, TJ Maxx, the list goes on, and her book of poetry, *All Along You Were Blooming*, made *The Wall Street Journal* bestseller list. Her new book, *Peace Is a Practice: An Invitation to Breathe Deep and Find a New Rhythm for Life*, is due out in mid-February. Morgan Harper Nichols, welcome to the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

Morgan: Hello, and thank you much for having me.

Rami: Well, it is our pleasure. The book was fascinating, and I want to start the way the book starts. I figured if you're-- I mean, you're honest in the book that I imagine we can be just as honest on the podcast. Your new book opens with this line, "For most of my life, I lived with undiagnosed autism. I spent years with a struggle without a name." That last part, living with a struggle without a name, really hit me. How important is it, do you think, to be able to name our struggles?

Morgan: I think it's very important, and I think that that's why I've always been drawn to words, in arts, anything that had any way of giving a name to a feeling, an emotion, a struggle, because it's really hard to find the language for what we're going through. Even sometimes, like, if someone uses a word-- even if it's just, "Oh, I'm sad," or if I struggle with this, like, even hearing someone else say it, it doesn't always seem to like, "Oh, well, they don't really get what I'm going through though," but I think that there are these moments in life where you do feel like someone finally said, "Yes, that's what I'm feeling," that helps me understand what I'm going through, and for me, at 31 years old, when I received my diagnosis, that was that moment for me. When that actual diagnosis was read to me, I just sat there and said, "Yes, that's it, that puts a name to a lot of what I've been dealing with," and there was a lot of peace in that moment.

Rami: That's interesting. Peace comes with the naming.

Morgan: Yes, and I feel like that's a lot of what I tried to write about in this book. This is my first what I like to call my first big girl book because before this, I've written like some poetry books, which do take a lot of work, and then I've written some devotionals, but nothing on the scale of like, "Okay, this is like a big girl word count," you really got to get these words down, and I remember my editor telling me this, and the first thing she said, I was just like, "Oh, give me some advice," and like, "This is a space where you're going to need to define things, just like people read books, to help them define things," and I remember her saying that, and I just sunk.

I was like, "Oh, this is just too much pressure," but I thought about it and I was like, "You know what? No, that's actually what I need to do. I need to name these different

moments in my life." Like, what was that thing that helped me find a sense of peace? Oh, it was a music. It was redefining community. It was deepening my understanding of what love means, of what being a new parent means, and it was really hard to actually put it down and say, "Yes, this is what I learned," because it felt definitive, but at the same time, it's like, "Oh, there's actually a lot of peace in being able to see that story, my own story on the page and see, okay, here's that thing that happened, here's how I learned and how I've grown from that." I just hope that in these stories, that it helps inspire others to do the same with their own stories.

Rami: I want to play with the idea of naming because normally, I imagine when I hear you speak about this, I mean, I think of a word, but I've been spending some time on your website, and I encourage people to go ahead and do this. It's morganharpernichols.com, and I'm assuming that on the homepage, the portrait that we're looking at is you.

Morgan: Yes.

Rami: Right, and this is your painting? I mean, I knew it was you because I looked up photographs and I thought, "Yes, that is you." I'm wondering if, when I'm looking at the portrait of you, I'm getting a sense of you naming yourself. Like, if you go on my website, there's photographs of me, but that's someone else, in a sense, naming me. I mean, I don't paint. Your work is gorgeous, but it looks-- I guess what I'm asking you is, tell me in what way you get to name yourself when you're doing a self-portrait?

Morgan: Wow, that's such a beautiful question, and it's interesting that you asked that, because I think that there is something kind of happening beneath the layers that I don't really think I've thought enough about, and that is, when I have this moment, I'll take a photo of myself and/or I'll take a photo of a lot of different things, including myself, and I'm like, I'm seeing more color or more nuance, like even squiggly lines and things that aren't in the portrait, or in the picture itself.

Like, there's more here, there's more here that I want to explore, and that's kind of what leads me to making that piece, which is like the self-portrait of myself that has flowers and bright yellow background, things that weren't actually in like the original reference photo, but what I'm doing there is, one is just kind of six year old me just having fun coloring, like a lot of that, a lot of what I make is still that for me, and then there's this other part, this kind of beneath the layers that I feel like I'm still looking for the language of just giving myself permission to explore this idea that maybe there's more to me than I even see in myself.

I don't know if everyone has this experience, but I know a lot of friends, I've talked to different friends that have had this experience where you look at a photo of yourself, whether you take it or someone else and you don't always like it and kind of dismiss it and say, "Oh, I look X, Y and Z, I look too serious, or I look whatever it is," and we may dismiss it, and I'm one of those people that tends to do that with photos of myself. I did that today, actually, with a new photo and just taking that moment to kind of have this mindful moment with my own portrait of myself.

It's like, oh, if you actually don't just dismiss it right away, there's more here. The more time I sit there, I can see there's a curiosity in my eyes, there's joy and wonder in my facial expression that I might not always see if it's just kind of a photo that I'm

like, "Oh, let me look at that and just move on." I appreciate you for calling attention to that because I do think that in a way that has kind of been a practice for me that I haven't even realized that I've done when I do take these moments to kind of make these portraits of myself.

Rami: Yes, there's a deeper naming going on. I mean, I love what you just said about-- I mean, first of all, about the little girl you with the colors and all that, but just seeing a joy in your eyes that maybe you wouldn't have noticed in the photograph. I mean, you could say, and I'm obviously saying it, that the photograph maybe doesn't have that joy, but as you get to name yourself, because it seems to me, and I'm not an artist and a painter at all, but it seems to me that you're doing a self-portrait from the inside out, not like a photograph from the outside in, and there is this joy that you know intuitively and intrinsically in your eyes, just to stick with that example, and yet it comes out as, "Yes, look, let me show you this joy in my eyes through my brushwork."

Morgan: Yes. Wow. Thank you. I just have to say thank you for even saying it that way. I don't think I've ever really thought about it that much, but I'm just-- I know this is a podcast and I'm just nodding my head along because I'm like, "Yes, that's exactly what that process is."

Rami: Well, thank you. I'm glad I was on the right track with that. Let me now switch over and say-- oh, no, no, let me ruin it. I've been so brilliant so far, now let me ruin it. I have someone in my family who is on, I don't know, they still say the autism spectrum, but he has autism. He's too young at the moment for me to ask him this question, but how has that defined you and how have you overcome the definition?

Morgan: It's multifold in terms of how it ends up coming out in my daily life. A common thread is that it really causes me to be very present to the moment, sometimes in ways I don't want to be. I have to really listen to conversations because just the way my brain is, I don't hear a lot of the nuances and conversation and I can't easily tell if someone's being sarcastic or joking with me. I hear a lot of things very literally.

I have to really pay attention, whether it's just passive, getting coffee in a coffee shop, or it's a deep conversation with my sister or my husband. I have to pay really close attention, and that can get really exhausting. I've had experiences where I was exhausted, and I was tired, and I wasn't paying attention as much as I maybe could have been and ended up taking something literally that was supposed to be a joke and just misunderstanding to a degree that everyone laughed at me. It can really go that direction, which isn't fun. At the same time, because I've had to be so present to every little thing, it is what has made me an artist. I have no doubt about that.

I have a sensitivity to color and sound and the way words look on a page. That's why I'm so drawn to poetry because it just allows you to just really spend time with where those words are sitting on the page, and all of that, I believe, is informed by me being autistic. It's twofold, always, at any given day, it's both of those things at once. I feel like I have to learn how to hold both of them, and that's why I continue to just keep coming back to art because it allows me to see it visually. It's like, "Hey, you know

that thing you struggle with, hey, here's a visual representation that there's another side of it, and don't forget that."

Rami: A lot of your work uses, I don't know what you say in art, but that doesn't tell us any, graphic elements and calligraphy, words. I want to make sure the listener gets what I'm saying, you write the words with the brush. They're part of the artwork, it's not like someone typed words on top of there. The calligraphy or the writing is also a part of your art. You found a way to bring these together, that really speaks on multiple levels to the viewer.

Morgan: Thank you. It's something that came organically and naturally. I've always loved looking at paintings, I just love looking at them. I will have moments even just going to a museum where I'm looking at this, especially abstract paintings. I'm like, "I feel like words could be on here." I'm like, "Maybe I could try that." Yes, it was an experiment and I enjoy just playing around with it and I've been pleasantly surprised that other people have connected with it too.

Rami: One of the things that you mentioned, because you have a child, right?

Morgan: Yes, yes, he's two years old.

Rami: That's great. How does having autism impact you as a mom?

Morgan: It's interesting because I feel like there's just a lot of pressure parenting in general. A lot of my being a parent has been through a global pandemic, and because of that, a lot of kids my son's age have had to deal with this whole new world of so many of them aren't around as many people as maybe a child their age would have been even just a few years ago. A lot of them are navigating a new world socially, even just not being able to see facial expressions behind a face mask. There's so many different nuances that are part of development and learning, how to be in the world that these kids are experiencing in an all-new way.

It's interesting because I'm like, "Oh, that feels like my life just in a lot of ways." When I'm interacting with people, I also am just like, "Whoa, socialization. I've got to be really aware." It feels like a new thing a lot to me. In some ways, I can connect with my son in that way of just me watching him explore the world or even just at home. We just had to get so creative at home and just keeping him busy and nothing's ever enough because he's two. He's already outrunning us and out-jumping us and out-screaming us. I'm like, "How does this high-pitched scream, just for fun, just come out of this tiny body." He's just like, "Let me just see, can I fill the whole neighborhood with sound, is it possible?"

We can't exactly keep up, but at the same time, it's like, "Oh, you know what? This is keeping me present to the moment and how can I connect with his joy and his zeal and energy for life." Yes, I guess that's a long way of saying that I do feel like these past few years has perhaps made us closer, even then maybe we would have been another time. There has been that blessing, and I am grateful for that. Yes, I am learning something new every day.

Rami: I appreciate you sharing that. That's personal stuff. We're supposed to be talking about the book, which I'm going to do right now. You're so interesting that I was just so curious. Let's talk about the book, so the title of the book is *Peace Is a*

Practice, and so I'm curious. How do you understand the word peace and how is peace a practice?

Morgan: Being somebody who loves words, I tend to connect a lot of words to images. From a young age, a famous song is *Flow With My Soul* talks about peace as a river. I heard that as a kid, and it just stuck with me. As I grew up and learned more definitions, I still kept coming back to this idea of peace as a river, a constant flow that runs through the wild. That's just an image that I felt like just kept growing and growing in my mind. The older I got, I just kept coming back to that. That idea of keep coming back to something is always interesting to me. Like I mentioned earlier, even when I'm painting, I'm very aware while I'm painting, I'm like, "Kid me loves this. Six-year-old me loves this."

I'm very fascinated by things that we just keep coming back to over and over again. I began to see that theme in my life of pursuing peace as something I come back to over and over again. Just going a layer deeper, it's like, "Oh, what's something else that we keep coming back to over and over again?" Well, we have to keep practicing things. If we want to get good at something, we have to keep doing that over and over again, that's what practice is. I think a lot of the good stuff in life is stuff that we have to practice. We have to practice entering into joy, we have to practice entering into peace, peace is a practice.

I remember the first time writing that, I was like, "Well, that takes the pressure off of needing to climb this mountain to peace." It's like, "Oh, it's more like a river in the wilderness." There's more of this stream that flows through this landscape of life that we're always trying to navigate. We get to practice coming back to that river over and over and over again. That's how it came.

Rami: I was very struck by the river metaphor because I share it. When I started a foundation to promote my teachings and my books and all that 20 something years ago, I called it the One River Foundation.

Morgan: Oh, wow.

Rami: We have this river motif in common.

Morgan: Oh, I love that.

Rami: It seems to me that part of the practice is returning to the river. I guess I would say the practice is the practice of surrendering to the river because the river wants to carry you, and it can't if you are fighting it. There is this element of-- I use the passive because I don't think I can control the idea of surrender, but I can be surrendered by life, by God, by the mother, by the river itself, whatever. I can be surrendered to the reality and find myself carried by it. It was a powerful metaphor for me too.

I found this thing in your book, it could have been a completely off-the-cuff throwaway line that you just wrote and never gave it more thought. Maybe I don't know, but for me, it was like, "What?" Here's the notion, you have this idea you share in the book or you tell us in the book that you keep a quote book, like a collection of sayings that speak truth to you. You call it, and this is the thing that got me, you call

it your bibliography. I thought that is brilliant because I'd never-- well, first of all, I never thought of it before, so it was new for me.

Like I said, you may not have given a lot of thought, but I want you to think about it now and to talk to us about, and hopefully, listeners will say, "Oh, I could do this," about creating your own personal bibliography. You read at the end of a nonfiction book, there's a bibliography, the source material. Here, it's not a bibliography of all the books I ever read. It's a bibliography of the teachings that have shaped my life. Tell us how you think of doing this and how you actually keep your bibliography.

Morgan: Yes. A few years ago, I was reading a nonfiction book and I flipped to the back, and I was looking at the bibliography and I noticed that some of the authors that were referenced, I was like, "Oh, I've seen these authors in other books." I was like, "Oh, they're like a little community." I was like, these different authors show up in each other's books. I was like, "Oh, isn't that interesting?" I tend to think of-- well, when I talk about community, we often use like my community.

I'm like, I always think of that as physical people in a room. I was like, "How neat would it be to carry with me my own little personal community, my own little personal bibliography in this journal that I can just go back to." I'm like, "Yes, even though I haven't met a single person in this book, they are a part of what got me here today of who I am." How neat is that, that they took the time to write something that ended up connecting with me? There's a closeness there. I'm like, "I want to keep that with me."

I just called it that because I was like, "Yes, it's my own little personal bibliography." I have this big journal. Every time I read a quote that I love and I actually do have some in there from people that I know in real life. One of them in there is very short and it's from my community college professor when I was sophomore year of school, who said to me, "Morgan, you're a poet." That was the first time someone ever said that to me. I wrote a poem for an assignment. He saw within that, he's like, "No, you should do something with this." I have that in there as a reminder.

Then there are other quotes that I have that I've read in books, just like everyone else read them in books. I never met those people, but I call it my personal bibliography. I wanted to include that because I was like, "I think this is something that other people can do, start to create this collection of storytellers and people's voices that have impacted you in a positive way. You can just keep going back and reflecting on it over and over again."

Rami: Yes, I thought it was just fantastic. A lot of people keep quote journals, but calling the bibliography really spoke to me. I was thinking that, like you said, at the end of a nonfiction book, you have a bibliography. A lot of it is the books that influence the book that you just finished, but we're talking about a bibliography made up of teachings from these other people. It's not just the name and a book they wrote, it's the quote from that text.

I was thinking of it as a, what if when you die, one of the things you leave behind, and I don't mean you personally though, I mean all of us collectively. What if when we die, we leave behind to those we love as part of our, whatever we leave them, our bibliography. Here are all the teachings, all the voices that made me who-- not all,

but you know what I mean, who made me who I am. I'm thinking of my grandson, he's heard my voice, but he hasn't heard all the voices that informed my voice.

If I had this to leave, it's like, here's my, I don't know, I was going to say mine, but that's not exactly right. Here's a dimension of me, all these voices that shaped me, here's my bibliography for you to have and flip through and then to add or create your own. I think this is a tremendous practice that people should take on.

Morgan: Yes. I totally agree because I think it just shows that we are ourselves but we're also everybody else too. We're connected to other people in a special way. As you said that, I think about my grandfather who passed away and I have some of his books and I have one of his Bibles. My grandfather, he was fluent in Hebrew and he would write things in Hebrew sometimes. I'm just like, "I want to know more from where this came from." I'm so drawn to it even though he's no longer with us. I'm so drawn to things that he would write and different verses and passages that he would highlight and why. There's just so much depth there. I find a lot of peace and comfort in that too. That's actually, again, it's a podcast, but I'm smiling.

[laughter]

Morgan: I'm like, that's something I hope to pass on even if it's just subtle, like, "Oh, yes, maybe someone after me will connect with this in some way."

Rami: Like I said, I was really moved by it. I'm sure you could find a local rabbi who would help you read what your grandfather wrote in Hebrew if his handwriting is readable. Morgan, you close your book with a poem called, *Peace is Possible or Practice Peace*. You have that in parentheses. I love the poem, but it's too long to read the whole thing in its entirety. If you're willing, I'd like to close our conversation with you reading the last three stanzas. If you have those, read those to us, and then we'll bring this to a close.

Morgan: Yes. Practice peace by becoming who you were meant to be, by embracing the inner relationship between greatness and smallness. Life is ordinary and extraordinary all at once. Embrace the lifelong process of becoming by recognizing that every small breath is a part of something greater. With every inhale and every exhale, you are becoming. Practice peace by holding on to every little thing that reminds you that you are a part of something so much greater than yourself. Practice peace with hope by keeping an active imagination, allowing yourself to dream, continuing to believe that peace is possible.

Rami: Our guest today, Morgan Harper Nichols, is the author of *Peace Is a Practice: An Invitation to Breathe Deep and Find a New Rhythm for Life*. The book is due out in mid-February. You can learn more about Morgan's work on her website, morganharpernichols.com. Morgan, thank you so much for talking with us on the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*.

Morgan: Thank you so much for having me. I truly enjoyed this conversation.

Rami: You've been listening to the *Spirituality and Health Podcast*. If you liked this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoy this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us at SpiritHealthMag. You can also follow me on the Spirituality and Health website where I write a regular column

called *Roadside Musings*. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The *Spirituality and Health Podcast* is produced by Ezra Baker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami, thanks for listening.

[music]

[00:30:27] [END OF AUDIO]

SUBSCRIBE to the SPIRITUALITY & HEALTH PODCAST

SUBSCRIBE to *Spirituality & Health* or visit [**spiritualityhealth.com**](http://spiritualityhealth.com)