



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 204 - Reclaiming Your Soul with Shirin Etessam
June 11, 2023

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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to [The Athena Wellness Podcast](#), the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Today's episode is brought to you by The Athena Wellness Academy, your resource for wholehearted living.

The Academy's featured offering is an online course called, *From 'Type A' to 'Type Be,' How to Mindfully Descend the Corporate Ladder and Invite What's Next*. This course is perfect for you if you're contemplating or navigating a professional transition, and it's available as a self study or with a small cohort of students facilitated by me, Kathy Robinson.

To learn more, I invite you to go to AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com or click on the link in the show notes.

[00:01:21] Kathy: Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.



Imagine a shattering, life-altering heartbreak, one that brings you to your knees in an empty abyss, where you question who you are, who you love and your purpose in the world. That was the beginning of a six-year healing process my guest experienced and not only thrived, but wrote the book she wished she had in those dark days.

I'm joined today by author and entrepreneur Shirin Etessam. Shirin's book is scheduled for release on June 20, 2023, and titled *Free to Be, A Six-Week Guide to Reclaiming Your Soul*.

Here's what we cover:

- The heartbreak and transformation that were the spark for the book;
- The importance of soul reclamation;
- The impact of information overload and how to minimize it;
- How awareness can help you manage your thoughts and emotions;
- The role of play in reclaiming your soul and self; and
- How to proactively manage identity loss by redefining yourself.

You can learn more about Shirin at shirinetessam.com and I'll put a link to her website in the show notes. I'll also link up her book, her streaming media company and the Rolling Stone article we mentioned in the episode.

And now onto the show. I hope you enjoy the conversation and find it healing.

[00:03:02] Kathy: Shirin, welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast. Thanks so much for being here today.



[00:03:07] Shirin Etessam: Thank you so much for having me.

[00:03:09] Kathy: So please, share a bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:03:13] Shirin: Well, my background, I think, is quite similar to yours in that, though, I was in entertainment, film production and the agency world, and I'm still actually in it.

So I created my own agency and I also have a 24-7 TV channel and platform dedicated to queer female content that I started in 2009 that's called OML Television and it's done fairly well, which makes me very happy. And we have a production division, OML Originals based on that. So many, many ventures.

And in 2013, I went through a massive breakup with my partner of 13 years and we had been friends for nine years prior to that. And 22 years of love, friendship, partnership, commitment vanished after a 20-minute conversation. And it threw me into just this really dark abyss of nothingness.

I was not only afraid because I didn't know what was going on, I was also confused by it because I felt that I had all of the worldly goods that everyone strives for and the accolades, the awards, the positions, the companies. And I realized really early on that this wasn't just a matter of a broken heart.

I decided at that point that I was going to really dive in and find out what it was and I went on a major soul journey. And it took me six years, and, mind you, this is like day in, day out, as I'm doing all my various ventures and being a single mom



to two beautiful souls, but challenging. And I left no stone unturned, looked in every nook and cranny.

I'd like to say that it was like this amazing process, but it was really often sloppy and confusing and dark and frightening. And along the way I started I had a lot of a-ha moments and started seeing the light. But I didn't want it to be superficial. And also, the grief that I was feeling, I just, I didn't want anyone to tell me what my process was going to be or how long I needed to grieve.

So it took me six years. But I call it my Magical Mystery Tour because it was, I mean, in looking back, it was incredible. So I took those six years. I realized that if I knew what I was doing in those six years, that the process that I went through could really be distilled into six weeks - you're welcome - and so I wrote the book that I wish I had when I was at the crossroads.

When we are at whatever crossroad, that is, whether it's a divorce or a loss of a loved one, or a loss of a country or loss of a job, whatever. That is a major life transition. But someone had recently asked me who the book is for, and what came to mind instantly was, you know, for anyone who feels like they're living a muted life. That's really it, you know? So if you feel that there's more to life than what you are feeling and experiencing, you know, the book may resonate.

[00:07:49] Kathy: I love that description of a muted life. As you were talking about your Magical Mystery Tour, I equated it to what I went through, something similar, as what you went through and I equated it to the Wizard of Oz, like what it was like for Dorothy before in black and white, and then stepping through that door into



Technicolor and how weird it was and all of those things. But you do get a very different perspective when you go through a trial by fire like that.

But what I appreciated about your book was it was really candid as far as, this isn't something where I'm sitting on my cushion and I'm feeling enlightened. This is like it's hard. You mentioned sloppy, it's messy and all of those things. And yes, you know, when we go through a transformation like this, the process is very messy. But the other end of that is think, you know, what's on the other end of that are things that you can't even imagine when you're going through all the messiness and the sloppiness.

[00:08:46] Shirin: And I think that's important to point out because I think people have this idea that it's a matter of, like you know, sitting in a lotus position and om-ing and namaste and all of that. I mean you could certainly do that. But truly the process is whatever it is and however you show up. And it's interesting that you said the thing about Wizard of Oz, because in the heart section of the book, which I can talk about later, I talked about feeling all the feels and thinking of our basic emotions as the RGB of the red, green and blue of our lives. So we can truly live in Technicolor. So spot on.

[00:09:35] Kathy: All right, wonderful. Now, we should say, the title of your new book is called *Free to Be, A Six-Week Guide to Reclaiming Your Soul*. And I love in the intro you say "This book is about excavating your soul from the massive jumble called life, and so maybe we start with this concept of the soul, and I'm taking this right from your book. You said I believe there are powers, frequencies, energies far beyond our comprehension that are constantly at work. This belief is why I'm



endlessly fascinated where science and spirituality dance together in all sorts of magical patterns," I love that, "And I also believe in a god within. For me, it's the true definition of the soul." So you make the distinction and you mentioned it already between the heart and the soul. So maybe we can start there, because we tend, we collectively tend to use that interchangeably. So maybe just give us your perspective on that.

[00:10:24] Shirin: Yeah, it's a fantastic question and, I think, a really important one. You know, a lot of people refer to our hearts as our inner child, which sometimes sounds cliché. In the book I call it our inner puppy. All the heart wants is to be loved, to be seen, to be acknowledged, to be cared for. That is it. But to ask it to guide us, I think, is misplaced.

Our soul, once we find it, reclaim it, and work from it, there is a wisdom in it that doesn't reside in the heart. Knowing that distinction is important because if we do get upset, if we do get disappointed, any of those things, that doesn't mean that the soul isn't doing what the soul is supposed to.

So the soul can say that you are meant to be an incredible singer, you know, and you get up on stage and you give it your all and you don't get the reception that you want. And your heart is really hurt by it. So you tend to your heart and you're like, "You know, sorry it didn't turn out the way it... You know, I still love you, I still see you, you are safe." And your soul is still like the badass warrior it always is. You know, it's like there could be explosions happening and you're still walking through the field. That's what the soul does.



So that's the distinction, really. Not that the heart isn't important, it's incredibly important. But it's like you know, tasking a five year old or a 10 year old with something someone should do who has a PhD in that knowledge, you know?

[00:12:39] Kathy: Yeah, I like that example because it's like the soul is the all knowing that says, "Yes, you were born and destined to be a singer." It's the heart that says, "Oh, and I have to get up on stage." Where the soul is like, "You can sing in the shower, too." What I love about the distinction is that the heart is what's leading you to try all kinds of things, because it's emotionally driven. Yet there is this inner knowing that it's not the expectation, it's not the outcome, it's the thing itself. It's you singing and what that does to you and to your spirit.

[00:13:09] Shirin: Correct. And the excavation that I talk about really has to do with disassociation. And there are a lot of studies about disassociation that somewhere between age zero and five or age zero and seven, we disassociate from our inner essence, our true selves. And the degree that we disassociate has to do with the environment and what happens.

But we all disassociate. So it could be that a child, toddler, disassociates because it doesn't feel safe in the environment it's in. But it could also be a toddler who is crying in the crib and the parents took, you know, a little too long to come in and get it. Somehow, the baby, the toddler, the young child does not feel that it is either safe or worthy. So it stops taking its natural cues from the inside, the true essence, and begins doing so from the outside and starts learning all the do's and don'ts and the rules and regulations.



And then we start with education and there's the grades, and then there's the awards, and then the certificates. And you know you have to do this in order to get to the college that you want and study this to get the degree that you want. But outer cues, outer cues, outer cues. And we adjust accordingly, "Okay, I could do that, I can study this, I can do this to make this much money. I can make you have that position." And all of that is great, except for the fact that the cues are all coming from the outside rather than from your true essence. And what happens at some point, as it did to me, is that if that is what your life is based on, it ends up not meaning much.

So the excavation that I talk about, and again, it isn't like, "Hey, go excavate," you know, it's very much a step by step how to process, because a lot of the books that I read which were fantastic, but I'm like, "How? How?" So this is very much the how to do the excavation.

And then, once you are able to find your soul and reclaim it, what do you do with it? How do you set it free, how do you live from that space? And I can talk about the structure of the book if you'd like

[00:16:03] Kathy: – Yeah, absolutely, we're going to get to that. But something just came to mind as you were speaking, and I'm curious. Now that you were able to bring your essence back in by going through the steps that we're going to talk about, how has your life fundamentally changed as a result of that?

[00:16:19] Shirin: You know, it's not rainbows and butterflies every day. What is incredible is that musicians talk about being in their flow. And I think they're in their



flow because they are in touch with their true essence, their soul. That's what is coming through whatever instrument or their voices. And I feel that I live that way.

And I now say that the only time I realize that I am not living in my flow is when I'm off-course. Or it's just like, "Oh, this doesn't feel right." And so I stop everything and re-center.

But I would say the majority of the time, 90, 95% of the time, I feel like I am in it. And I liken it to the visceral feeling of learning balance on a bike. Like, you can't unlearn that, right? You get on a bike and it's there. So that is the visceral feeling that I have on a daily basis as I'm talking to you.

And the driver of the belief that I have is that as long as I am in that flow, truly living my true essence, that I can't go wrong. Because this is what was meant for me. It sort of has a feeling of being in love, though it's not that heightened. But it's this true feeling of connectedness. But not just with one person. I mean, I'm feeling it right now. I feel it when I play with my puppy, when I go for a walk, when I do the things that I do.

And I wrote the book so that it would be experiential and immersive, so that it wouldn't be conceptual. I recently likened it to the difference between thinking about skydiving and actually skydiving. I mean very, very different feelings, like, "Oh yeah, well, maybe I'd do that or maybe I wouldn't do that," and like, "Holy!..."

[00:18:54] Kathy: Right, but what I appreciate is that it wasn't prescriptive. There were suggestions and there's a lot to choose from of what resonates for all the different readers that will find their way to this book, which I really appreciate. It



wasn't like. "Do these five things. It more of, "Here are some things that might resonate. Pick one, try it, give it a try."

[00:19:13] Shirin: Yeah, and I think that is really important to point out. Buddhists call those who practice Buddhism practitioners. It's in the practice of doing it. And especially in the West, we are so incredibly busy. Like I get off this interview, you get off this interview, there's like, we have our list for the day. So when do you spiritual? When do you do that?

So the book is intended to not only be immersive and experiential, but integrated within our everyday lives. So you can do it if you're at a stoplight. I actually have a meditation that is very quick and I often do at stoplights with eyes open. I want to point that out.

[00:20:08] Kathy: Very helpful in San Francisco and New York.

[00:20:12] Shirin: Yes, correct, So, yes, so to customize it and integrate it and truly experience the process, rather than reading the pages and be like, "Oh well, that's interesting." You know what I mean?

[00:20:32] Kathy: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And you mentioned the structure of the book before. It's in two parts. The first is about releasing what no longer serves. And the second is about how to fill that space with soul leading and soul nurturing habits and practices to the point that you just made.



And so the first thing that you talk about is mental impact. We start with the mind, right? The mental impact of information overload. What is information overload from your perspective and how do we begin to ease it?

[00:21:04] Shirin: The mind detox, the brain detox, is the number one chapter and week, because that is the biggest culprit in it is the biggest way that we stand in our own way. So that's like the first thing that needs to be cleared.

There's really two main takeaways of that week. One is that we are not our thoughts, which is the definition of awareness. It's creating the ability to step out of our thinking. So, as Michael Singer says, and Eckhart Tolle does, too, to be the witness to our thinking rather than being lost in our thoughts. And creating that separation is so liberating.

I would say, probably the biggest a-ha moment I had was when I realized that I was not my thoughts. Because when you realize that you have thoughts and thoughts don't have you, tremendous power and freedom in that, because then you can pick and choose. "There's that thought hmm, is it true, is it not? Yeah, maybe come in, sit in the back of the bus, I'll tend to you whenever. This thought yeah, okay, yeah, it works for me, it makes sense, it works in my life. I'm going to hold on to that."

So we don't choose the thoughts that come into our heads. And there's 60,000 thoughts a day and they say that 80% of them are negative and up to 95% of them are repetitive. So you imagine this washing machine of crap that is



repeating. And then what do we do? This day and age, we turn on the screen and information, information, information, information, information information. So there is infoxication, it's real and true, and it basically is content overload.

And when we have, when we're in a state of infoxication, we can't truly think clearly. And I would say that the majority of us are going through our days not being able to think clearly because there is so much information coming at us. So, all to say that it is truly up to us to say, "No more." So we decide how much information we consume and how we consume it.

So the first week is all about that. It's our relationship with our minds and what, not necessarily what we allow in, though there is that as far as external content, but also choosing what thoughts we carry, what wolf we feed, so to speak. So that's the extent of week one, and the idea is, the thought is that if we are able to separate ourselves from our thoughts and limit information that comes to us, then we create a space for our soul to guide us. But as long as we have the monkey mind chatting away, there's no way we can make room for that. So that's week number one.

[00:25:07] Kathy: Yeah, and I think the point that you made about awareness is a really important one. I think it was Pema Chodron who said that, "We are sky. Everything else is just weather."

[00:25:17] Shirin: Yes.



[00:25:17] Kathy: So having that perspective of like there's going to be weather there, but that's not you, right, and how do you make that distinction?

And so then the next couple of weeks are all about creating space, and then, when we get to the fourth week, if we've done all the hard work of releasing what no longer serves, the second half of the book begins with a chapter on play. And I have to tell you, as a recovering Type A myself, play has never come naturally.

So when I got to that chapter, I took a deep breath, but there was a quote that I loved. And it was, "Play is a state of mind rather than an activity," and I was like, Oh, that resonated." I'm like, "Okay, I'm in, I want to know more about this."

So you mentioned flow before. My question is about that. Is immersion in an activity a way to play, or is it a way into play?

[00:26:08] Shirin: I think it depends on the intention and the activity. I have to ask a question before I talk about this. Is there a play personality type that resonated with you?

[00:26:23] Kathy: There was Explorer and there was Creator, for sure.

[00:26:26] Shirin: Yeah, oh, that's funny because mine is Explorer, Creator and Joker.



[00:26:33] Kathy: Oh, wow, okay. Yeah, I didn't have Joker. Storyteller was kind of on the border there, because there was a storyteller in there as well.

[00:26:40] Shirin: So the activity truly is... I say that you, you have to choose the activity intentionally/unintentionally, purposely/purposelessly, because the only rule of play is that you don't do it for a certain purpose or a certain goal. So if you are going to do cartwheels in your backyard, if you are doing cartwheels and you're like, "Well, this is really good for my, you know, I'm getting my workout in and look, I'm cartwheeling better than the other person and I'm going to count how many times I cartwheel." That's not play.

Play is just going and doing cartwheels and being silly. You know, like, my go to is dancing, like no one's looking. You know, if I'm on the dance floor and I'm with friends, I've got my... When I'm dancing alone, it's some sort of like jungle dancing and all of that.

And it's interesting because I was in Florida a couple of months ago and we were watching, I was watching, these kids on the beach. They were all maybe like five-ish and they were so intentional. They had their buckets and I think they were creating some sort of castle or structure by the waterline. So you knew that it was going to be gone within an hour, right? But I mean they had their roles. There was, like you know, team spirit. They were handing things to each other and all of that, and they didn't, it wasn't like...

[00:28:25] Kathy: It was natural.



[00:28:27] Shirin: Yeah, and it wasn't like they were laughing their butts off or anything. It was very much like, "We're going to do this." They were creating a moat and you know all this stuff. But that's it, like it was just there, in their flow. They're doing their thing, this is what lights them up and it will be gone within an hour. You know that. That's, that is play.

[00:28:50] Kathy: Gotcha, gotcha. I wanted to wrap up with... I saw an article that you wrote for Rolling Stone about the shifts and the positive actions we can take to untangle our careers from our identity. And the reason why I wanted to touch on this is a large part of our audience comprised of people in midlife transitions.

And, with the work that I do, I find that this is one thing that really trips people up, "I was this. I'm not what I'm about to become. Who am I in this middle liminal space here?" And so I thought it would be really helpful for the audience if you could just speak a bit about why it's important to untangle our personal identities from our career and maybe how we might be able to do that proactively.

[00:29:33] Shirin: Absolutely. It's a bit of a phenomenon, especially in the US, when, you know, you're at a party or wherever you are, "Who are you?" "Oh, I'm a banker, oh, I'm an accountant, oh, I'm a plumber." It's like, "So what do you do?" Who are you when you're not plumbing and accounting and banking right? So, you know, when you are acting as a mom, are you still that banker? You know what I mean?

So now, when people ask me, "Who are you?" I always start with *human* first. I'm like you know, "I'm human, I'm mother to two gorgeous souls, I'm a wife. I'm, you



know, and here are the things that I do, and I probably give them a much longer answer than what they expect. But that's truly it. Like I can't say I'm a media executive, that just that is such a small portion. It's like saying I'm Sagittarius, that's what I am. You know, who are you? I'm Sagittarius, it's just that's not how it works. But the way that this society works especially, that's what we lead with, too, you know, give ourselves some credibility, or whatever it is.

So identification with a career is truly temporal, whether it lasts, you know, five years or 50 years. And if your identity is wrapped up around that, once you stop doing what you do, whether it is for, you know, at the end of the day, or, you know when you retire, then your self worth is wrapped up in what you have identified yourself with and you are at a quandary of "Who I am?"

So, instead of clocking in for fifty years as the banker and then, you know, at retirement age saying, "Oh my god, you know, what do I do when I'm not?" or you know, whatever that quandary is, what if you shifted that conversation so that it would be, "I am who I am and here are the ventures that I have undertaken." And maybe one venture lasts your entire life or you do many various things.

But that's the difference. That underneath it all, you are the gorgeous human that you are and that you do a variety of things. And the other thing that that does is that if you decide mid-career that what you've been doing isn't resonating with you and you make that shift, it isn't so, "My god. This person was in film production and now they're in finance." It's sort of like, "This really resonated with me for some time and now I'm shifting."



I mean I tell people like, yeah, you know, Shirin is a media executive and entrepreneur turned spiritual teacher, and I'm like, "Well, spiritual teacher is yet to be seen, hopefully, and I haven't turned. I haven't turned." It's part of my evolution, you know. And I'm still executive producing projects and such. So that's kind of that's, that's what I mean.

[00:33:38] Kathy: Perfect, wonderful. Well, I can't thank you enough for being here. Before we wrap up, please tell folks how they can get in touch with you and, most importantly, where can they buy their book, buy your book.

[00:33:48] Shirin: Thank you, that will be theirs. So the book is available on many platforms, Amazon, Barnes and Noble and others. Actually, if you go to my website shirinetessam.com, you'll see all the various places that it's available online. Also, hopefully, at your small independent bookstore. Please check to see if it is there and if it's not, ask for it, because that is important to me. And so, yeah, Amazon and Barnes and Noble, probably the easiest way to find them. Anything associated with me as an author and this process is under my name, so shirinetessam.com. My social is also [@shirinetessam](https://www.instagram.com/shirinetessam), whether it's Instagram or TikTok.

[00:34:47] Kathy: All right, well, I will link up the book. I will link up your website, OML, and the Rolling Stone article, which I found very interesting, so I'll get all that linked up. Such a wonderful conversation. I thank you so much for your time and good luck with the book. I'm sure it will find its way out there.

[00:35:04] Shirin: Thank you so much for the conversation and the opportunity.



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[00:35:10] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!

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[00:36:12] [END OF AUDIO]