

## What Is Wanting to Find Expression Through You? by Tami Simon

What follows is the transcript of an interview between Tami Simon of SoundsTrue and James Hollis. You can listen to the audio version of the interview [here](#).

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge produced by Sounds True. My name is Tami Simon, I'm the founder of Sounds True, and I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges. The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you'd like to learn more or feel inspired to become a supporter, please visit [SoundsTrueFoundation.org](https://SoundsTrueFoundation.org).

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is James Hollis. Jim is a Jungian analyst, a former director of the Jung Society of Washington, DC, and the author of more than 15 books, including two books with Sounds True, *Living an Examined Life* and *Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*. With Sounds True, he's also created the audio series, *Through the Dark Wood: Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*. And a new series, *A Life of Meaning: Exploring Our Deepest Questions and Motivations*. All right, I'm going to tell it to you as it is. In my work at Sounds True, one of the greatest privileges I feel I have, one of the greatest joys for me is to get to speak with someone who has the depth, the life experience and the ability to help so many people like Jim Hollis. He puts us in touch with—I'm just going to say it how I experience it—with the deepest longings of our soul, and how to have the courage to act on those longings. Here's my conversation with someone who I find is a terrific help for making meaning, James Hollis.

It's personally meaningful for me, Jim, to have this chance to talk to you about me. I think it's personally meaningful because it's something I care a lot about and also just because of a lot of passages I'm going through in my own life, coming up on 60 years next year. And I just want to thank you for making the time for this conversation and for the depth of your life and work. So I want to begin by thanking you.

James Hollis: Well, thank you, Tami. It's a privilege to be with you today. And I'm always enjoying our conversations.

TS: To begin, let's talk about meaning by talking about meaninglessness. And I want to address that and bring in the person right now, who's listening, who's going through a period in their life where they say, "To be honest with you, things feel a little thin, a little lacking in any kind of meaning. I can't find meaning in my life right now." Can you address that person and make some suggestions for them of how they could relate to this period in their life?

JH: Well, first of all, I think we need to understand that meaning is not something out there that we can find. It's an experience that we have internally, and if it's not our experience, then it's not really meaningful. We have various structures imposed upon us throughout our lives, such as gender roles and limitations. We have all kinds of socioeconomic powers that try to shape us and create our values. But if it's not consistent with something important going on inside of us, it's never going to connect. And so I know people who have been or are unhappy because they're not happy all the time, as if happiness is a kind of steady state. Happiness and meaning are tied together in this regard. In those moments, we're somehow being consistent with our inner psychological and our spiritual reality. So meaning is something that is when my soul is in right relationship to whatever is happening in my life at that moment.

TS: OK. But let's talk to that person who says, "It used to be previously, before XYZ, that I felt I was in right relationship, but now the work I'm doing, it just doesn't animate my life anymore. It used to." Or, "My kids have left home and the role I had as a parent, that's not delivering that sense of alignment, that sense of right relation and I'm lost. I'm lost right now." A previous series you created with Sounds True was called Through the Dark Wood. Let's talk to that person, Jim, right now who's in a "dark wood," they feel lost. How can they view this situation instead of just with utter despair, with something else?

JH: Well, the first thing that I would want to do is de-pathologize their experience and say, first of all, your psyche is forever moving on, it's like a flowing stream. And many times, places where we invested our energies heretofore were, in fact, meaningful, but we've outgrown that or the life has moved on. You just mentioned the empty nest syndrome. It's common to all of us. I felt it myself when my last child left and I had to say to myself, now, what would you say to someone who's in this similar position?

I would say, look, where you invested your energy is good. Notice they're off living their journey. It would be far worse if they weren't. But that energy now has come back to you. What are you going to do with that? That energy has come back to you in a way that brings something to you to sort of consider: where does my life need to go next after this?

We can't depend entirely upon outer structures. One of the side effects of the pandemic is so many folks were pulled out of their external structures. Meeting with friends, going to work, hobnobbing with colleagues, etcetera, etcetera. And people were thrown back upon themselves. And understandably often didn't like the person they met at that moment. So I think we have to, first of all, recognize that meeting itself is a byproduct again, of something going on inside of us. And our outer structures can either support that or oppose that. And we're often not in charge of what happens in our outer world, quite obviously.

And so it's those moments we have to say, all right, now what is my task facing me in this context over which I seem to have no control? Because there's always a task, that was really the subject of the book and I think a previous lecture that I did for Sounds True called *Swamplands of the Soul*. There are times we are taken there. And the question then is, what is the task you now face that moves you from victimage to an active engagement with your journey? And does it enlarge your journey or does it diminish your journey?

TS: So, Jim, you mentioned that during these periods in our life, we could call them passages—I think that's a term that you use—that there's some kind of task that's needed. And in your audio series, *A Life of Meaning*, you talk about this notion that there's an appointment with destiny that potentially we're being summoned to keep. And I'd like to hear more about this, this notion that we have these appointments with destiny and how you understand that.

JH: Well, if we ever stop and ask ourselves the question that I know we all ask as children, in some fashion, but have forgotten for a long time now: Why am I here? Really, why am I here? Am I just to fit in with a crazy world around me or is there some sense of purpose in my life? And so destiny is really what nature or divinity has invested in us from the beginning. And I think our summons, our job, if you will, is to try to serve that. Because from childhood on, we're obliged to report to the world what our parents want, what the school teacher wants, what the employer wants, what our partner wants, etcetera, etcetera. And at some point, we always have to ask a different kind of question. And that is: What does my soul want of me? What is wanting to find expression in the world through me? That's a whole different question.

One could say in the first half of life were governed by, what does the world want of me? And to what degree can I mobilize my energies and service to my responses to that question? Second half of life: but I've been here. Maybe I've fulfilled many of those roles and expectations. What now am I to do with my life? What's wanting expression through me? Now, just give you an example. When I was a child, I think like many children, I thought maybe my desire in life was to be an athlete or something like that. I could never have imagined I would spend most of my days listening to people's problems. On the other hand, the experience that I have is somehow so enriching and so meaningful to me, I can't imagine spending my life in any other way.

And as a result of that, my work makes me happy. The subject matter of these hourly conversations doesn't make me happy, but the process of being present in people's life journeys is something that's profoundly meaningful. So the real question always is: What is the task life is asking of me here that allows my spirit some form of expression and integrity? I think the toughest talk I ever had to give in my lifetime was—I was asked once, in another city, to go talk to a group of glioblastoma patients, all of whom had brain cancer, all of whom would be deceased, most likely, within six months at the outside. Now, what do you say to a group like that? And so I had to ask myself the question: What is it that I would find most difficult about this, apart from leaving loved ones? And what came up on my inner screen was, it'd be the loss of your autonomy, the loss of your freedom. You're now a creature of the medical process, of the disease process.

So we talked about ways in which one could remain psychologically, spiritually

independent of those processes, working with dreams and meditation and active imagination and so forth. So no matter how dire the circumstance, there's always a summons to some kind of task whereby we retain our core integrity and our core sense of personhood.

TS: I wonder if you could share, from your own personal life, how this reinvention has played out in your adult life, how you've gone through passages like this. What's been required of you?

JH: Well, I think one of the passages certainly occurred right on schedule at midlife, at 35, having achieved all the goals that I thought were important in life. I had a serious midlife depression. It sent me to my first hour of psychoanalysis in Philadelphia many, many years ago. And it ultimately led to me, unexpectedly, to traveling to Zurich to completely change my profession from academia to psychoanalysis. And it led me to work through—and still working through, to some degree—some of the issues that life had presented me. So I think that was a passage. And in every passage, something is played out. The roadmap that we have utilized up to this point no longer works, for whatever reasons, is no longer applicable to the terrain in which we find ourselves. In those moments, there's a terrible in-between. And often, the therapist is a figure who can help us find our way through that in-between time in our life.

Another passage I'm going through right now, of course, is aging and dealing with illness and that sort of thing, continuing to work at what I love, continuing to express the value of my relationships, but also being very mindful, of course, of a growing sense of physical limitations and limitations of time and energy. So we're always going through a passage of some kind. Some are larger and more noticeable, some are minimal. But in every case, once again, there's the summons: What's the task life is bringing me now? Let me give you one quick example. I was always deeply moved by a letter that I read once from the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned by the Hitler regime for his resistance to the Third Reich and was ultimately executed in April 1945.

And he asked himself there, looking around him. He said, "Did God put me here?" He said, "No, no, Humans put me here." But he said, "My task here is to ask, what is the will of God for me in this situation in which I find myself and over which I have no control?" And I thought that was a very significant move, because again, it was a summons to an accountability, to something within that kept him free even while his outer life was imprisoned.

TS: Now you mentioned at this point in your life—you're 81, correct?—as we're recording this together. And what would you say is the task that's currently being asked of you right now in this phase?

JH: Well, believe it or not, my biggest task is learning to say no to so many requests for time and for doing things, which is on the one hand gratifying. I'm pleased that people find it of some value to them, but it's always been hard for me to say no to people whose

sincerity and real needs are palpable. I'm also trying to figure out, when do I start tapering back on my workload? Because right now, it's as busy as it's ever been. And at the same time I find it, as I've said, meaningful. So it's kind of hard to know how to make those sort of changes. But also as I said, to sort of titrate your energies with the changes in the body, because after all, nature has the final verdict on all of this. And as I approach more aging and obviously mortality, I have to say, quite honestly, my biggest concern is the well-being of my wife, who is 80 now and doing well, but also experiencing limitations. And I want to be here for her. And next to that, I'm still curious and still full of imagination. I want to keep learning, there's so many things I want to learn about.

And I find learning is still the greatest of joys and I don't want to give that up, but I'm also very much resigned to being mortal. I don't find myself anxious about mortality. I prefer not to have to die in pain. I hope that's not the case, but on the other hand, that's out of my hands. So I have to say, quite honestly, this is probably the best time of my life because I feel freer, psychologically speaking. I find myself being less and less concerned about what the world might think about me or whatever the opinions I express might be. And I'm willing to abide by my history and what seems to be, again, wishing expression through me. So if I serve that, I think it's an interesting journey and I'm glad just to be on it.

TS: Well, first of all, I'm so happy to hear, Jim, that you're feeling such a sense of fulfillment at this point in your life. And yes, that makes me happy. And thank you for saying yes to this request, to be on this podcast, with all the requests you're saying no to. Now I want to check something out. What I hear you saying in this part of our conversation so far is that if we're going to keep our appointment with destiny, we have to be willing to, you could say, reinvent yourself. Or you could say, just keep inquiring, keep asking what's wanted now? How does life want to work through me now? It's not like you check a box at some point and go, oh good, glad I took care of meaning. Glad that's done. There's no checking the box. Is that your understanding?

JH: Absolutely. No, no, we need to keep reinventing ourselves. I've always been moved by some lines by Yeats, who was criticized for some substantial changes he made in his writing style. He said:

The friends that have it I do wrong

When ever I remake a song,  
Should know what issue is at stake:  
It is myself that I remake.

So our sense of self keeps evolving. And again, there are more mysteries to explore, there are more ways to reflect on things. There are more opportunities, frankly, to be of service to people as well. I find myself increasingly wanting to be helpful in life. I mean, quite apart from profession, but to say everybody out there is suffering, and if you can just be kind to somebody that you meet or be thoughtful about how you help them with their jobs, then you will find your life is enriched by that.

Going through the medical process, for example, I went through 40 sessions of radiation plus a lot of other treatments, and I found myself waiting with other folks before treatment. And what was remarkable was nobody was saying anything. Everybody was looking away. I think people were feeling their own fears, but they were also somehow feeling tremendously isolated, almost as like we're all sharing some secret here. And so I made a point of . . . I mean, I'm an introvert, but I found myself trying to be an extrovert there and talking to of people. "How long did it take you to get here today?" Because people are coming from all over the area. Simple question like that.

Nobody was offended by that question, it was very innocuous. But from that, people started talking and, after a while, we started greeting each other and finding out where people came from and what they did for a living or what they were doing with their lives. And I don't say this with any sense of personal grandiosity. I'm simply saying it lightened the experience for all of us, and I met some very nice people there. And that psychological isolation was the thing that I was most finding to be the case among my colleagues in treatment. And I realized that was more damaging than all the other things people were going through.

TS: Now in this series, *A Life of Meaning*, a couple of different times, you brought into your presentation a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke, "The goal of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things." And then at one point you said, "To be defeated by greater and greater things is how we keep our appointment with destiny." And I wanted to understand how you understand that Rilke quote and why we need to allow ourselves to be defeated by greater and greater things to keep our appointment.

JH: Sure. In the first half of life, I couldn't have imagined acknowledging defeat. I would say, "We're here and we're supposed to keep working hard to win these things." But of course, what Rilke was really driving at was if we are being continuously defeated by ever-larger things, guess what? We're taking on larger things, we're taking on the places that maybe we didn't feel permission to access before, maybe we're afraid to address that. And one of the things you can say at this stage of life, there are fewer things to fear. One of the things you can say, having survived certain kinds of significant illnesses or brushes with death, well, there's less anxiety about that ironically. And one of the things you can say is, if I'm continuously being defeated, that means I'm growing, because I'm taking life on.

And somehow, that seems to be far more interesting than trying to find a safe place to hide out. And we know there are many places to hide out in life and hiding out has struck me as ultimately anti-life itself. Why are we here? Not to make a splash in the world, because all of that is evanescent and delusionary anyhow. It's more about saying, what I am called to be more fully is myself, with respect for everyone else. We're not talking about narcissism here. We're talking about if you are comfortable within your own sack of skin, so to speak, relatively able to accept yourself and forgive yourself, the mistakes that you've made in your life, then it's a far better way to go in this world. Then you can be open and sharing and comfortable with other people.

TS: OK, but I'm still not 100 percent clear what this means: to be defeated by larger and

larger things. And I wonder if you can just give me a specific example of defeat: this was a defeat.

JH: Well, first of all, at midlife, I felt tremendously defeated, having been victorious in all the things that I wanted to attain in life, by having that midlife depression. That was very confusing to me, to stay the least. I came to recognize that that was my psyche's way of showing up and saying, "But there are other issues we really want you to address, so you've got a different agenda coming up." So that felt like a defeat of my conscious plans and intentions. To use the example of illness we were talking about, I was in treatment for two different cancers and required an enormous amount of commitment to treatment plans and schedules and the whole medical hospital regimen and so forth. And so I determined I was going to sort of allocate as much psychological energy as needed to be present and cooperative and, I hope, cordial to all of those processes.

And at the same time to say, all right, I'm going to maximize enjoying what I enjoy doing—that is to say being with my wife, enjoying my work, enjoying writing, and so forth. And so what would've been seen as a defeat there, I think, was actually a summons to a different kind of challenge, not to be owned by a process, to recognize its importance and, again, allocate what was obligatory, but also not to be defined by that. Now in the past, I would consider that a kind of nuisance and a kind of defeat of my scheduled intentions, but a change of attitude can help enormously in all these matters.

TS: Now in the series *A Life of Meaning*, you say very definitively, "There's something in us that always knows what is right for us." And I thought, well when someone's in a difficult passage, they're not in touch with that part of them that knows what's right for us. How do we find that part of us when it's far away?

JH: That's a very good question, because first of all, yes. And I've learned the hard way, there's something in us that always knows what's right for us. And I can say quite literally, if I need to decide what is appropriate for me in any life situation, ranging from practical problems to large questions of life, I sort of put it inside and wait for an answer. And it always comes back to me. It's almost like, and I've imagined a bunch of little folks running around inside the solar plexus, working on these things and they always get a report back to me. What happens . . . You're right. When one is in those difficult places, one forgets that we have within us extraordinary resources, the resources of resilience, the resources of insight, the resources of adaptation, and resources of courage at times. And underneath all of this is a question: From whence comes my real authority? See, we're born with it. It's called instinct, but we immediately have to trade it away because the demands of our environment are so large. We have to sort of constantly be trading off with our environment until we lose contact with it.

And then we begin to say of the enormous traffic that we have going on inside of all of us and coming at us every single day, which voices from that extraordinary mélange of voices truly come from your own soul, from your own depths? Now sort through that. It takes time, it's a discernment process. And when you find it, then find the courage to live it. And if you do, this will be the right path for you. It's not necessarily the path that will lead to an instantaneous resolution or will please people or even make your life simple.

It's rather going to be the path that's right for you. Most of the people that we would admire in history are people who found that voice within them in moments of crisis, and they held true to that voice and something carried them through.

You can put it this way. He said, "We all need to know what supports us when nothing supports us." And I think that is a profound paradox. What supports me when nothing supports me? And so I know that when I need to make a decision, I wait for the dream. Waking at three in the morning, I see something from a different standpoint. I even find it sometimes when I'm driving and I'm distracted and something comes up from below. It's in those moments that you recover a relationship to your own truth, and that's the discovery of a personal authority.

TS: Now you mentioned that if we look in history at many of the people that we have the greatest respect for, we'll find that they are people who didn't follow convention, but they listened to their own inner guidance, their own instincts. And you bring forward on the series *A Life of Meaning*, this notion that there's a community of exiles, that we can find a sense of belonging with this community of exiles. And I wanted to hear more about that as someone who's often felt like an outsider, like an exile.

JH: Sure, sure. I think most of us, as children, when we stopped for a moment, reflected on what we were seeing or what we were being told thought, "This doesn't make sense to me." But I remember specifically when I was around 10 thinking that, and I'm remember thinking that I'm just a kid and those are the big people and they must know what's going on. So I guess I'm wrong, I'll just shelve that for now. Well, I grew up to be one of the big people, came to realize not many people know what's going on. And most of those who act like they do, I think you'd better question their intentions. It's rather a question of saying, what is it in me that leads me to where I am most comfortable with my own soul? You see, that's the critical issue here. We had that authority, we lost it, we have to recover it. And again, underneath all of this is the summons to accountability, to what is true for us.

TS: Now that's interesting. This word, accountability. What do you mean by that?

JH: Well, to be accountable means everything that comes out of me, whether intended or not, is clearly trailing in my own wake and I am responsible for that. People have the notion that in analysis, you lie on a couch or complain about mom and dad. Well, that's not true. It's certainly true that one is greatly influenced by gigantic figures in our lifetime. But the critical issue here is we're not dwelling in the past. If the past isn't past, it's present and influencing your present. And you're accountable for that. I might say, well, there are various forces that worked on my life and I couldn't help those forces and powers and neglects and so forth. And yet I'm making choices every day, and what it means to be an adult, psychologically speaking, is to be accountable.

I am responsible for that. Now, Jung pointed it out once, he said our biggest shortcoming actually is that we walk in shoes too small for us. We live small lives. He said, secondarily,



he said the greatest burden a child can bear is the unlived life of the parent. So if I'm accountable, then I'm also accountable to the unlived life. I'm accountable to stepping into what life has asked of me and what is wishing expression from me. And at the end of the journey, if we're conscious, we look back on this, we might say, well, I wish I'd done this or that or regret this.

That's part of that accountability, but at the same time, one wants to say, I was here, I did the best I could, and I'm glad for the journey I've had. And we can only do that by being accountable, not only to the consequences of our choices or failed choices, but also to what is looking for expression through us into the world.

TS: Now I want to see if I understand something, Jim, because it's one thing for me to be accountable in my own life for whatever is unlived in me and the choices I'm making or not making, the things I'm doing, not doing. But am I also somehow accountable for the unlived life of my parents, my grandparents?

JH: That's a very good question, because we all have with us the internalized models of the lives that were lived before us, and there's a strong tendency for folks to repeat those models. That's why you have phrases like the biblical, "The sins of the parents are visited until the third generation"—until that sort of wears out, you see? So the first tendency is, in the face of these influences, to repeat them. Therefore, you see patterns running through the generations. Second is to run from them. Anytime a person says, well, I don't want to be like my mother, or I don't want to live my father's life, we're still being governed by that. We're still saying, "I want to be not that," and yet that's still playing a role. Or thirdly, maybe we're out there unconsciously dealing with this in a life of distraction, a life of busyness, a life of addiction—we're not uninfluenced by these forces.

We're always influenced by them. So the question then is always to ask this pragmatic question: What do those examples have a tendency to make me do, or to keep me from doing? That's a different question. And that begins to open the doors to saying, well, I found that myself, I'm often inhibited in the areas where my parents were. Or I find myself sort of pushing toward the same values they had even though they don't fit me. Or they blocked me from making those choices. I didn't get the permission that I needed to have. And one of the issues I mentioned in one of the Sounds True books is one of the central tasks of the second half of life is to grab hold of the permission, live your own journey. If you don't have that, you don't have anything.

And if you don't struggle to find that personal authority that we were talking about, you don't have anything. You may have a well-adjusted life, you may have a productive and affluent and "successful" life, but it's somebody else's life. Oscar Wilde said once, "Most people wind up living somebody else's life." And there's a lot of truth to that because of the power of examples around us.

TS: Now, I listened to A Life of Meaning. And as I was listening to this eight-session series, it's over eight hours, I took a bunch of notes. And before having this conversation with you, Jim, I went over my notes and I circled the things that I thought were the most interesting to bring forward. And I noticed a theme that again and again, I wrote things

down that had to do with giving into fear. And I'll just give one quote here you say, "It's all right to be scared, it's not all right to live a scared life."

And you talk about the work you've done with people. You specifically focused, in this one comment, people who are between the age of 65 and 80 and how they said—you saw this theme—the thing that kept them from feeling fulfilled at the end of their lives were all the different ways that they had given into fear and were living a constricted, fear-filled life. So this really stuck with me as a theme, that if we're going to have a meaningful life, we have to work through our fears and move through them. And I want to know more about what you've seen really helps people do that.

JH: Well, yes, first of all, it sounds horribly reductionistic to say, good, many of our behaviors, maybe even most of them are fear based, fear driven, or defenses against our fears. That's natural, because fear itself is not the problem. If we didn't have any fear, we'd walk right in front of a truck. Fear is provided us by nature to protect us. On the other hand, fear also constricts, often limits our capacities and our range of options. And so when we get right down to it, there are elemental fears that a child has that stay so deeply lodged in people, they continue to dictate their lives, such as the fear of what will happen if someone doesn't like me.

That alone you see, when you're a child, if nobody likes you, you're in big trouble. You're very isolated. And you feel that sense of exile that you mentioned before. And I realize I didn't quite finish that question, let me just touch on that a moment. Many times people feel there's something wrong with me if I don't fit in and secretly they're in exile, but they think there's something wrong with them when that's the case. Where I say there's a community of exiles, because many people feel that they just don't have political parties, they don't meet and talk about it. They keep it because they're secretly frightened or even ashamed. And so underneath all of that, you see, is the fear of disapproval, of being outside of the circle of welcoming folks.

So again, the fears that we have are normal and natural. The question is, what does it mean to be living a fear-based agenda? Then your life is always constricted. Then it's sabotaging the expression of your possibilities in life. Jung said once, in a book published in 1912, "The spirit of evil is negation of the life force by fear." That's strong language. Only boldness can deliver us from fear, and if the risk is not taken, meaning of life is violated. Now, I think of that as a kind of daily reminder to me. The way I put it in one of the books *The Middle Passage*, "Every morning, two gremlins at the foot of the bed, challenging us and threatening us, fear and lethargy. Fear says, it's too much, it's too big for you. You can't handle this life. And lethargy says, chill out. Tomorrow's another day, turn on the television, try to be distracted if you can."

And both of them are the enemies of life, and they'll be there again tomorrow, no matter what you do today. So we have to realize they are inside of us. The biggest enemies to life are inside of us: fear and lethargy. If we can address that life opens up and begins to be what it's supposed to be, in my view, the unfolding of the gem that each of us embodies in this world.

TS: All right. But I'm still wanting to understand, for those of us who have a lot of fear, maybe it's the fear of humiliation or fears of failure, other things. And we can say, Jim, I'm

inspired by you, but I'm going to tell the truth here, these fears are holding me back. I get it, I get it. They're holding me back. Are you just telling me, go through it anyway, bust on through, I mean, just . . .

JH: Well to a degree, but also realize that probably 90 percent of the energy that is blocking you really has its origin in your childhood, where everything was overwhelming. That where we are stuck, and everybody has stuck places in life, is the triggering of moving through whatever the stuck place may be, activates a field of archaic anxiety that lies in the basement for all of us. And we have to realize that's where it's coming from, it's all from the past. Now, for example, many surveys have indicated the American public's greatest fear is public speaking. And what's the fear underneath that? Well, I'll say something and somebody's going to dislike that. That's a very childlike, an archaic fear, but again, it operates in us to the degree that that's people's biggest fear. Now what you have to do is smoke that out and say, all right, but that's like asking the child that I was to drive the automobile that I drive today.

We would never dream of that. And yet we're placing that childhood fear in the driver's seat of our lives. So what you have to stand up to is the child's fear of whatever it is that you are being blocked by. And yes, sooner or later one has to go through it. So the way I always deal with public speaking is to say look, it's not about me. My role here is simply to be the vehicle for certain kinds of ideas or values. So pull yourself out of the picture, right? At the end of the day, you still live with your own journey. This is about being a vehicle for life, and it's true for all of us. Life asks us to serve it and we don't serve it when we're constricted and our life is narrowed down to fear-based responses.

TS: Can you give me an example from your life, if you would, of identifying a fear that was holding you back and how you were able to work through it?

JH: Well, I just gave you one, I think, as a card-carrying introvert, I was always afraid of public speaking and yet I spent all my life in teaching, so that's public speaking every day at some level. And that's why I began to realize, it's not about me, it's about standing in relationship to the material that you care about and sharing that with others. So it was about reframing the fear and recognizing in subsequent life, but that's something derived from your family of origin really. In fact, I grieve at how intimidated my parents were, who would never speak up on behalf of something because of their life history, and how constricting that was for my life for the early years.

And rather than judge it, I grieve it. And at the same time, I can't afford to have my life governed by their fears. So sooner or later, again, what is our ultimate obligation? It's to serve whatever our soul asks of us. And I use that word soul in the sense of our deepest sense of purpose and identity in life. And again, it has very little to do, per se, with outer tasks. It's often being willing to surrender to something that's truly important to us, something that's truly meaningful to us, and it'll be different for all of us as well.

TS: I, myself, am turning 60 next year. And sometimes I think, gosh, to still be working

through some of this stuff, some of these fears from my childhood at this age, really? After all this inner work? And yet in the series *A Life of Meaning*, you normalize that. And I wonder if you can speak to that for people who are like, wow, I'm going back to when I was 10, still?

JH: Well, I'm afraid to tell you, it will keep going. Again, Jung spoke to this very articulately when he said, "We don't solve these problems, because they're part of us." We can't cut our history out of us like a tumor. He says, "Our task is to outgrow its influence." That's the point. You don't rule out what is wired in you neurologically and in your psyche. You could have a dream tonight of your third grade teacher, someone you haven't seen or thought of for decades, and yet suddenly there she is in full glory. And you realize everything that's ever happened to us is somewhere contained and recorded within us and has the potential to be triggered.

Although that's true, it's far superseded by other larger capacities that we all have. And so we don't solve these things. And if we keep thinking we have to solve them, we'll be forever thinking of ourselves as failures. You have to say, you recognize it sooner, you get out of it sooner, you lessen the damage this time. And each time, you've gained a little more purchase upon your present, conscious life. That's what he means by outgrowing it.

TS: Now just a little bit more on this topic of fear, Jim, because you and I had a conversation about a year ago when you were diagnosed with cancer and were starting to go through these treatments. And I remember in talking with you about it, you seemed very matter-of-fact about it. I didn't feel like here's somebody who's meeting a fear of death in their life as much as someone who's like, this is the next thing I have to do, and then the next day I'm going to see my clients and I'll get back to you. It was all very matter-of-fact, and I'd love to understand more about that.

JH: Well, I think that's an accurate description of how I felt and still feel. I had a history of cancer in the family—the entire female side of my family had perished of cancer, including my mother and grandfather and uncle and others. So I've always known that was in the genetic load up, it didn't come as a surprise. But as I said before, I wanted to allocate to it whatever it asks of me in terms of reasonable commitment to the healing process. And I'm grateful to say that to the best of my knowledge, I'm in good shape today, but also to continue my life as fully as I can. Why would I shortchange the life that's available? It's always finite, it's always shorter than we would wish perhaps. And to say, all right, meanwhile, life goes on. Meanwhile, what are you going to do today with your life? Meanwhile, what are your choices about today? You're not going to let it be defined by this.

And as far as fear of death itself, my ego's not keen on the idea, to be sure. On the other hand, I've often thought along with Socrates, who said when he was asked almost three millennia ago, reportedly, he said, "Either it's a big sleep and I can use the rest or there's another life and it's beyond my power to imagine it." Socrates says, "I'd like to look forward to talking to the other philosophers and see what they have to say." So I think whatever death is, it's a cessation of the ego's worries and or it's a transformation of such proportions that it buggers our imagination. So whatever I think, feel, and believe at this

moment literally is rendered irrelevant. And if I remember that I'd think, well, all right, we'll leave that to the mystery. Won't we?

TS: So you don't have an utter confidence in continuity, it's more just an open exploration of the unknown for you?

JH: Of course. No, no. I mean, if I knew, I would tell you, right? I don't.

TS: Thank you Jim, friend to friend, yes.

JH: Yes. Among friends, people have different opinions, but that's what they are. That'd be different belief structures. I'm agnostic in the sense that I think it's a mystery of such magnitude that I don't presume to comprehend it anymore than I comprehend life. Life itself is a mystery. Why are we here? That's another mystery. What's wanting to unfold through us? That's greater concern than the cessation of this. Because as far as I know, any cessation is going to terminate my daily concerns and worries anyhow.

TS: OK, so you've said several times this idea, how important it is, what wants to come through you, how life wants to come through you, what wants to be expressed? How do we know when we tune in and we listen that this is what wants to come through us and that this is not an ego agenda of some kind?

JH: Well, that's a very good question. And it's always a discernment process because many of our decisions that we thought were correct at the time were driven by complexes of one sort or another or by fears. And for me, I've always thought of myself, since childhood, as a teacher. When I went into my first classes, I remember thinking, these people are here to help me and they're teaching me about how to live in a larger way in this world. I don't know if I would've expressed it that way, but that's what I experienced. And I thought, how marvelous to be that kind of person in your life. So I felt that calling, even in grade school, and that's what I've always done is be a teacher, just in different forums. And so I think for a person, there is such a thing as a calling, and I'm not talking about job here.

Job is how we pay our bills. A calling is what are you meant to do or be as a person. And part of our calling is to stand in relationship to other people. Part of it is to stand in relationship to nature, part of it is to stand in relationship to what is wanting expression through us. So it's reasonable to experiment. I'd also liked to make Major League Baseball player when I was a child. I didn't get the body for that. I'd also liked to be a painter and a musician. I don't have the talent for that. I have the experiment with that and I learned pretty quickly, that's not the vehicle for me. So there's a little trial and error that's good in life too. But along way, there's often . . . I mean, how many times have I've heard as a

therapist: I always wanted to do this. And there's a but in that sentence, but there was always a reason and many times outer forces at work, yes. Many times an inner reluctance to step up to the challenge, an inner terror of stepping into that largeness. Another question I've often asked folks to ask at junctures of decision along the way, does this path enlarge me? Does it diminish me? And we usually know the difference between the two of them and choose the path of enlargement. Not as world sees it, but as it is confirmed within you. That's the key because always, no matter what I do, all the right things I'm supposed to do will not matter a hill of beans if it doesn't matter to my own internal life, because that's where these decision are really being made. That's why people can follow all their instructions, do all the right things, and then find it is without meaning, without purpose. There's no energy there anymore.

That's what happened to me at midlife. And frankly, I look back upon that now as a good thing that happened, though I didn't understand it at the time because it said to me, look, your psyche has autonomously withdrawn its approval and support from the places where you want to keep putting the energy. Now, wonder what we could figure out if we begin to pay attention more to what's going on inside of you? Then we realize there are other initiatives, other forces that wish expression through you. When you have that kind of conversation with your inner reality, then your life becomes richer, even more interesting. Again, this is not about narcissism. This is not about withdrawal from the world, this is about improving the quality of your relationships, the quality of your contributions to the world. But if what we do isn't rising out of a right relationship to our own in internal life, it's not going to be right out there in the long run.

TS: As we're talking, Jim, I'm reflecting on how listening to you feels so, I would say, healing for me, balancing for me, resetting for me, something like that. And I think part of the reason—and I just want to share this and also give you the chance to comment on it—is so often in the spiritual journey. In our contemporary world, there's some notion of arriving somewhere, getting things to be all glittery, shiny without problem. Some notion of it's all just like bright sunlight if you're doing it right. And somehow, spending time listening to *A Life of Meaning* for eight plus hours and being with your worldview, helped legitimize a kind of inner wrestling that I often feel in my life that I think I somehow thought was something wrong with me. Like, what are you doing? Why do you always have to wrestle with so much interior sorting, Tami?

JH: Well sure, because there's a divine ferment within your spirit. That's just what it amounts to. I had a client years ago who said, "I just wish I was a happy carrot." And I said, "It's too late for that, you are not a happy carrot. You're here as a person for whom life matters. You have questions and if you live your questions, you're going to have a larger life." We all, as young people, want answers. We assume there are answers, and we might find answers from time to time, but we often outgrow them or there are answers for a short time only. We have to say, all right, where is life leading me next? That's the question for me. And what do I need to do to be prepared for that? What work do I have to engage in?

Because it does take courage, it does take discipline. For example, writing. I have a lot of books and I'm not doing it for money. They don't make that much money. It's that something inside of me is wishing expression. And so I've been willing to sacrifice an evening of relaxation for sitting at the computer and pounding away. And out of that

chemical process, something emerges that feels good, feels right, and that I consider part of vocation. In other words, in your life there is always a question. What is life asking of you next? What matters most to you? What in the end enlarges your journey, brings you into proximity to the mystery of this journey?

Because in the end, it's all a mystery. Jung said once, in one of his letters, he said, "Life is a short pause between two great mysteries." Now it's very succinct, but that's as good a definition of life as I can think of, a short pause between two mysteries. And part of the mystery is for us, I think, to render this short pause we call our life as luminous as we can by the powers that we are already given and to somehow respect them enough to serve them.

TS: Which is interesting. It's the final point I want to talk about, this notion of allowing what's mysterious to be mysterious. I've noticed a couple times in my life when I share some deeply mysterious things, people ask me, "Well, how do you explain that?" And things that have happened, like voices I've heard of guidance and things like that—and they're like, "Well, what's your explanation for that?" And I noticed I felt under pressure to offer an explanation of some kind, and sometimes I've even made up explanations, but the truth is I have no idea. I don't know, but I feel—is that OK? It's a mystery and you seem very comfortable with that.

JH: Well, if I could explain it, it's not the mystery. Really if it's something that I don't know or understand then I'm willing to abide, I can tolerate that in a way I couldn't have as a young person. I don't mean I'm passive around it, it makes me all the more curious, but I'm comfortable with mystery because I think the things we can understand are going to be byproducts of where our psyche is at that moment. And tomorrow, I hope we're going to be in a different place in a larger frame of reference. And it all gets a little confused, a little murky, and to be able to tolerate that and to go with that, I think, is one of the real adventures of life. It's like being a white water rafter. You are not in charge, you go with the flow of that. But when you do, it's also exhilarating.

TS: I've been talking with James Hollis. With Sounds True, he's created two audio series. They're both gorgeous. If you ever want to go on a long drive or take a long walk and listen to something that will put you really in touch with your insides, what's stirring inside of you, I recommend both of these series. The new one is called *A Life of Meaning: Exploring Our Deepest Questions and Motivations*. And then a previous audio series we created with Jim, *Through the Dark Wood: Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*. With Sounds True, James Hollis has also written the book *Living an Examined Life and Living Between Worlds: Finding Personal Resilience in Changing Times*. Jim, thanks so much for your friendship most of all, for this conversation, and really all the inspiration you give to so many. For all of us, thank you for serving life. Thank you.

JH: Thank you, Tami. It's a privilege to be with you, you always have a great interview with some tough questions, and that's why I look forward to it.

TS: Thank you for listening to Insights at the Edge. You can read a full transcript of today's interview at [SoundsTrue.com/podcast](https://SoundsTrue.com/podcast). And if you're interested, hit the Subscribe button in your podcast app. And also, if you feel inspired, head to iTunes and leave Insights at the Edge a review. I love getting your feedback, being in connection with you, and learning how we can continue to evolve and improve our program. Working together, I believe we can create a kinder and wiser world. SoundsTrue.com: waking up the world.