

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

JR: Seth Haines is the author of *Coming Clean* and, most recently, *The Book of Waking Up*. Here's what Mike Cospoer has to say about *The Book of Waking Up*: "Haines does two things in this book: he awakens us to our addictions, and reveals himself as a thoughtful, incisive, and skilled writer."

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

JR: "This book invites us to dive deep into the condition of our hearts, and offers guidance, hope, and direction for a better way." I deeply appreciate Seth's honesty. I think you will too.

JR: Seth Haines, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast!

SETH HAINES: Yeah, thanks for having me. It's so much fun to be here.

JR: Yeah. In your book — *The Book of Waking Up*, your latest book — you talk about how you used to start every day in the key of joy, because your mother would walk you up and sing a little song to you. Um... [pause] and uh, I wanna start there. The idea of waking up in the key of joy.

SH: Yeah.

JR: What does that mean... well, first of all, what was the song your mother sang?

SH: Well, it's funny, she, uh... [chuckles] she sings several songs, but the one that I remember the most was this little song that went, "Good

morning to you, good morning to you. We're all in our places with sunshiny faces. This is the way we start a new day." And I will not sing that for you because... I don't know, it'd just be kinda weird.

JR: [chuckles]

SH: Um... but yeah. So my mom has always been a singer — is a singer still to this day — has just always had a tune going on around the house. And that is just the way I remember her waking us up, and it was never annoying to me. It was very annoying to my sister, she'll tell you. But to me it was never annoying. It was just kind of the way, as a kid, my day started, and it was always sort of a happy opening to the day. And as I write in the book, you know, I've always... my whole life, I've been really prone to some dark dreams, some terrifying dreams maybe. And so it was just generally a stark juxtaposition, that kind of... the night time, um... you know, the nighttime terror and fear I would have, and this sort of waking into this beautiful, joyful moment.

JR: Ahh, I love that. What do these ideas have to do with the writer? This idea of waking up in the key of joy?

SH: Yeah, you know, with the work of the writer, that's a phenomenal question. I actually think probably subconsciously I wrote about that primarily because I do sense, as a culture, that we are in a very dark season, that we're in a time that doesn't have a lot of joy. I feel like society exists in a place right now where... sort of the fear, the dread, the chaos is almost... celebrated if that makes any sense? And as a result of that the human condition is in a, in my estimation, a very downward spiral, and perhaps this kind of spiral that leads you into needing to numb the chaos, needing to numb the pain, needing to numb the anxieties of life that are just attendant with our reality right now.

I think subconsciously I probably wrote the passage about the key of joy because I'm acutely aware that we all need to wake up into something that feels like joy, especially in this particular, chaotic, anxious moment. And so

I think as a writer I'm sensing a need. I think artists around me are sensing a need. We may not be conscious to that need. But I think right now, for me as a writer, that idea of pressing into simple things like joy, and increasingly like silence, increasingly like love and beauty and and truth goodness — I think those are things that are critical right now, in this milieu.

JR: Yeah. So you mentioned the urge to numb. Um... you have struggled with addiction in your life.

SH: Yeah.

JR: And your first book, *Coming Clean*, was about getting sober. Um, and this... this second book is about becoming more awake to your life. Could you talk about the difference between — the distinction you draw between sobriety and being awake?

SH: [pause] Yeah, you know, um, I found for me particularly... so my story was one of alcohol abuse for a season, or disordered relationship with alcohol is probably a better way to put it. I found myself really struggling with terms of addiction —

JR: Okay.

SH: The term “addiction” when I was first quitting the bottle. And not because I wasn't in the most colloquial sense “addicted.” I was. Because you know when we talk about addiction, we tend to imagine the sort of Skid Row, uh you know, deadbeat with a brown bag, a bottle. Or, you know, I remember once being approached by a crack addict on the streets Memphis asking me if I wanted to buy a rock from him, you know? These are the things you think of when you think “addiction.”

And I wasn't really in that boat. I was pretty high functioning, you know? I was pretty celebrated in my career. People kind of thought of me a certain way. And so I didn't even really *feel* like an addict, even though I was. And

then on the back end of that, when I sort of stopped drinking and came clean, what I found is that I didn't feel super sober either.

JR: Hmm.

SH: Right? So I quit drinking, but I still have this anxious pull to numb. I still have this *deep* desire to drink all the bottles of gin and all the bottles of whiskey. I still have all the desires to overeat at times, or um, whatever the draw might be to numb the pain. So over the course of the probably the two-ish... two to three years after I stopped drinking, what I found is that I didn't actually feel sober. And so I sort of started looking for new language for that. And I found that language in this Theodore Roethke poem that I love. The poem starts, "I wake to sleep and take my waking slow."

JR: Yeah...

SH: And it's this idea that we sort of wake into the realities of the world, and we learn — in his words — we "learn by going where [we] have to go."

JR: Yeah.

SH: And so the wakings, waking idea... it just seemed more true to me than being sober. It's not like I flipped a switch and one day I was sober.

JR: Uh huh.

SH: It was more like I turned a corner, and then I started to wake. And wake, and wake, and wake. Um, and so in this book, I'm trying to do the work of saying, like, the idea here is not to drink or not to drink. It's are you willing to really walk into the slow process of waking?

JR: Yeah, yeah. And I assume we're talking here about choosing to take the pain of being awake to your life, as... [pause] In the knowledge as, I'm gonna get to the joy of being awake to your life.

SH: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I think you know, again... [laughs] We're so quick as humans in any given experience to sort of... either be all in in one way or another. That's one reason I've been calling zeroes and tens.

JR: [laughs]

SH: Like, we're either zero or a ten. There are no fives anymore. Everything is the worst ever or it's the best ever, you know?

JR: [laughs] Yeah.

SH: And I think, you know, for me and my experience, the pains in life are terrible. Like, you don't— nobody wants to hurt. I don't want to hurt.

JR: Yeah.

SH: But it's the pains of life that have kind of taught me and brought me to my biggest joys. You know, it's the pain of having a sick son, in my case, that then almost passed and was saved, that's brought me to my greatest joy, seeing him every morning. You know, it's the pain of the season where I was always disconnected in my marriage because I was over-drinking. It's brought me to the joy of now being very connected with Amber, and being all in on loving her the best way I know how to do it.

Um, you know, the lessons of pain always bring us to our greatest joy. I think those two things are... it's critically important to understand that life is not zeroes in tens. It's not all pain or all joy. It's this really messy dance between the two.

JR: Yeah, there are so many ways to avoid pain, but they pretty much all lead to shame.

SH: Yep!

JR: And so you often tell people every day you have this choice between pain and shame, so choose pain.

SH: Yep! One hundred percent!

JR: So your first book — I mean, the previous book, *Coming Clean* — you wrote that kind of as an exercise of your first, what, ninety days after you stopped drinking? Is that...?

SH: Yeah... yeah, so um... to give you a little backstory on that, I had written a novel that I still have done nothing with. And I was sort of speaking with an agent. And it's a novel that I wrote drunk and then edited... [laughs] quasi-sober, I guess, is probably the best way to put it?

JR: Uh huh.

SH: It's a book that I still love. One day, maybe I'll do something with it. But, um... I remember it had been a really productive season as a writer. I was writing from some really dark places of pain. You know, like I said, my son was very sick at the time. It was kind of touch and go. We weren't sure what we were gonna do or how he was going to fare. And I remember it was in this beautiful Methodist church in Austin, Texas. And it was one of those mornings where I was hungover. I had stayed up way too late. I'd been drinking, I was at a conference, and I was talking to a photographer from Nashville. And I remember the doors opened and it was one of those moments where like a thousand shards of light, you know, kinda come through. Because I'm so hungover, every little bit of light was hurting my head, and piercing...

JR: Yeah.

SH: And on the other side in walks this silhouette — this ghosted silhouette. And as the doors closed and her face kinda comes into focus, it's actually someone I knew, and her name was Heather King. And I didn't expect to see here. I thought she was living in Minneapolis, and here we

were in Austin. And she walks in the door. Her past story had been this story of alcohol abuse and her own coming clean.

And the minute I saw her, I walked up to her, and instead of saying “Hello,” I said, “How did you know you had a drinking problem?”

JR: [laughs]

SH: Words you always wish you could take back, right?

JR: Yeah right.

SH: And she looked at me, and she said, “You know, don’t you?”

JR: Wow.

SH: And the rest of the course of that day, over the course of that day, she just very... gently and tenderly and almost this like motherly way — maybe grandmotherly way.

JR: [chuckles]

SH: She reminded me actually of my own grandmother. Uh, walked me through the process of understanding what a drinking problem looks like and that I had one. And I remember the last thing I said to her was, “I’m just afraid that if I quit drinking, I’ll never write another word.”

And um... I guess that really stuck with her. And I went back home, and entered into therapy. And as I was talking to a therapist and saying like, “I have this drinking problem and I need help,” I was very disorganized in my communication of the pain around it. And he said, “You know, you’re a writer. I need you to go home and start journaling this stuff out, so that when you come here we have something we can actually walk through that’s organized.”

JR: Uh huh.

SH: And I remember around that same time, maybe the same day, I talked to Heather. And she just said, “You know, it’s really stuck with me what you said about never writing again. And what I would encourage you to do is go to the page, and begin to journal the process of coming clean in the most creative and detailed way you can. I think what you’re gonna find is that the muse sings so much louder in your sobriety than you anticipated. And I think you’re gonna find new ways of seeing the world as you write out and journal out your sobriety. So go be creative and do this work.”

JR: Wow.

SH: So that’s what I did for ninety days. At the behest of my therapist and Heather, I journaled as creatively as I knew how this process. And the agent that I was talking to later about the novel, um, said you know, I’d really like to start with some nonfiction that has to do with what you’ve been journaling. And uh, you know, the rest is history.

JR: Yeah. Man, God bless Heather!

SH: Yeah! She’s incredible. [laughs]

JR: Yeah, I took the tour of Ernest Hemingway’s house in Key West...

SH: Oh my God...

JR: And the tour guide just thought it was sooo funny that he was drunk all the time. And all I could think was just think what he could have done if he wasn’t drunk all the time!

SH: Yeah, man. Yeah.

JR: But the fact that he spent all his sort of dramatic energy on these

shenanigans instead of pouring it into his work... I just wonder how many people have been messed up by those hilarious stories of Ernest Hemingway and his drinking. And, you know...

SH: Yeah, and it's a lie! It's a lie that somehow the drinking fuels the creativity. I mean, I don't... obviously, there's something to lowering inhibitions.

JR: Sure.

SH: I'm not gonna pretend that's not a thing.

JR: Sure.

SH: But this idea of "writing drunk"... I mean, how many great writers do we revere today who... um, you know were... maybe they had a drink, some brandy or a glass of whiskey, but they weren't drunk while they were writing. I mean, you know this from their lives, like the Chestertons. You know, G.K. Chesterton is a *master* on the page, and I can't imagine that he took the advice of "write drunk and edit sober." I can't imagine that Buechner was a drunk while he was writing sort of his best work. I just... I just feel like that's such cheap and easy advice, and people just, like, allow people to get away with it. Because hey, we're all creatives, we're all gonna be addicted to something.

JR: Yeah, right.

SH: I hate it.

JR: So I wonder if your idea of sort of waking to joy is... is the harder but truer path to the kind of inspiration that people seek in drink and other... you know, substances.

SH: Yeah. I mean, it may be. Maybe I — you know, I don't... [pause] To

me, what I think of most acutely is that what we are seeking in the bottle or — hey, let's put the bottle aside. In shopping, or porn use, or overeating, underrating, image management. I think the thing that we're seeking in all of these expressions is this... sort of dumbing down or numbing down of the pain of life. Which I think is acutely different than maybe the remedy being joy, if that makes sense? I think it's only when we sort of say we're not gonna numb the pain anymore. We're actually gonna feel it. We're actually gonna deal with it, get to the root of it, that we actually sort of cultivate the soil. We prepare the soil of our lives for true joy.

JR: Hmm. Yeah.

SH: Only when we know our darkest side and deal with our darkest secrets, and, sort of as you intimated, get over the shame can we prepare the conditions for joy.

JR: Okay, in the — I guess it's the, uh, can't remember — early in the new book, *The Book of Waking Up*, preface or first chapter, you talk about if you had a bookstore...

SH: [laughs]

JR: You would have a... I love this. That you would — well, I guess I gotta back up. Cause you talk about coping mechanisms.

SH: Yeah.

JR: As distinct from being awake to your own life.

SH: Yeah.

JR: And uh, drinking is one kind of coping mechanism, but you just named several others. Shopping, and... you know, all those other things. So if you had a bookstore, you said there wouldn't be a, um... you would take the

self-help section and sort of do away with it, because... you'd have a "waking up" section. And some of the books from self-help *may* make it into the "waking up" section.

SH: Yeah.

JR: Your recovery books may make it into the "waking up" section. But most of our self-help books are just... they're not about waking up. They're about getting better at our coping.

SH: Yeah, that's right.

JR: I thought there was a lot of wisdom in that. So... unless I just spoiled it, why don't you talk us through that a little bit?

SH: Yeah. I... what I said in my own journey was that some of those self-help books weren't particularly helpful, because they only lead you into a certain type of sobriety? A to-do or not-to-do sobriety?

JR: Mmhm.

SH: And here's what I mean by that. Like, you can read any number of books about alcohol or alcoholism, and they'll give you coping mechanisms, ways to deal with the cravings of alcohol. And these are not bad things, right?

JR: Yeah.

SH: Like, meditation is not a bad thing when you're having an anxious fit and really want a drink. So some of these coping mechanisms are really good, but I didn't find them particularly helpful. Because what if you can't meditate because your mind is so busy? Or what if you can't pray because you've lost faith in God? Or you know, what if you're supposed to make amends, but the person you have to make amends with is dead?

JR: Uh huh.

SH: I mean, there are some very real limiters to a lot of this self-help stuff.

JR: [chuckles] Yeah.

SH: What I did find really, really helpful were the books of stories. Um, and I'll highlight one — there are several, maybe I'll highlight two. In Gabor Maté's amazing book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* — which does have some sort of practical takeaways — but it is a book of stories of heroin addicts. And it's about how they dealt with underlying trauma — or didn't — but if they did deal with underlying trauma, they were able to walk into this new way of waking up to the world around them. And it was more of a story that spurred the imagination, like this is what's possible.

My favorite book though — maybe one of my favorite books of all time — but my favorite book in this section would be Mary Karr's *Lit*. And *Lit* is this beautiful exploration of the poet Mary Karr who kind of was this backwater Texas poet who sort of stumbled into an accidental try-hard career of being a poet in New York, and was a voracious drinker. And found herself — she's an atheist, she was a drinker — found herself at sort of the bottom of the — the rock bottom of the barrel, sort of. The rock bottom. Bottom of the barrel's supposed to be...

JR: [chuckles]

SH: And all of a sudden she experiences sort of this waking that comes out of alcoholism and into the divine light. And so *Lit* is sort of this idea that she stumbled into this career as a literature professor. She was at one point "lit," you know, as we use the term as it relates to being drunk.

JR: Yeah.

SH: And ultimately at the end of it all, she found the inner light. She was lit

from the inside in this return to Catholicism, or this turning to Catholicism and to faith. And so for me that was a *reallllly* helpful template. I was struggling with my own faith at the time because of my situation. I'd always come from a place of faith. But as I saw her journey, I thought okay, if an atheist, alcoholic poet can become a dry, Catholic, faithful follower of God. Then *surely* —

JR: [laughs]

SH: — a guy that was raised in Arkansas, around all the — in the Buckle of the Bible Belt with all of the discipleship tools and all the things that I was raised with — *surely* I can do this. You know, if she can do it, I can do it.

JR: Yeah.

SH: And I think that's the kind of stuff, to me, that is super helpful. It was super helpful for me, and I think it's helpful for addicts. And I think it comes from our tension and our need for stories to drive our narratives instead of how-tos.

JR: Yeah. Have you read Jamie Smith's *On the Road with St. Augustine*?

SH: No, no... I want to. I *need* to.

JR: Well, there's a part where he talks about recovery stories and how they're so repetitive, and they all start to sound alike. And he says and that's the point.

SH: Right...

JR: You know, we value originality. We think — when we're the one telling the story, we value originality. But when we're the one hearing the story, we need to know that my story is not unique. Um... and we need to find our identity in a story... by finding our place in a story that we didn't write.

SH: Yeah.

JR: That sounds like what you're talking about here.

SH: Yes, and I think that's true, man, no matter if we're talking about recovery stories or faith stories. It's just [inaudible] what we're talking about. I think... in fact, I was talking to a psychiatrist about this today, an expert in his own field. And he was saying, you know, for so long we've been dominated by left-brained mechanisms in the West. And the real need for humans is the make meaning from the right brain. To use art and creativity and storytelling and all these things...

JR: Yes... yeah.

SH: And to create a meaning that we can identify with? 'Cause we can't all necessarily identify with go make amends, you know? Sit and meditate, do this, do that, yada yada yada. But we can sort of all identify with the stories.

JR: Yeah... that's great. Alright. We are coming to the end of our allotted time. So let me ask you the question that I always ask at the end of the interview. Who are the writers who make you want to write, Seth?

SH: Oh man! [laughs] I've named a lot of 'em...

JR: I had a feeling you already had, yeah.

SH: Yeah, yeah. So I think of Mary Karr for sure. Her voice is masterful. She has *owned* her voice.

JR: Yeah, she's amazing.

SH: She's amazing. I would easy early on, um... you know, probably

Tolkien. The usual characters early on, Tolkien, Lewis.

JR: Sure.

SH: Um, but as I get older, increasingly those are still some of my go-to sources.

JR: Yeah.

SH: Um, Chesterton for sure. Mary Karr for sure. Roethke in poetry for sure. Uh, William Stafford in poetry.

JR: Uh huh.

SH: Just *amazing* poet. Carl Sandburg. Just these people that are so able to, umm... I think like, capture the voice of the people and give us the voice of the people? Those are my go-to people. I love Hemingway. *The Sun Also Rises* is probably one of my favorite novels.

JR: Yeah.

SH: So it just... I think it's this idea of being able to give us the story of the people and the language of the people. These are the writers I really love.

JR: You're an Arkansas boy. Do you read Charles Portis?

SH: No, um... no, I don't. [chuckles] But I've been asked that twice this week.

JR: Okay.

SH: So maybe it's time.

JR: It is time. The time is now.

SH: [laughs] Yeah. The time is now. It is upon us.

JR: That's right. Well, Seth, thank you so much. You've had a lot of wisdom in this short time.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

JR: You've had a lot to say, and I really appreciate your honesty, and I appreciate your insight.

SH: Thanks for having me, I really appreciate it. It's great to be with ya.

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song "Too Good" as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

JR: The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

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