Podcast Transcript: On Gelassenheit

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Guest: Miles

1) Opening and Why Gelassenheit Matters

Rafi: In today's episode, we turn toward a word that is almost impossible to translate — and that may be essential for survival in the modern world. The word is Gelassenheit, usually translated as "letting-be," "releasement," or "serenity." But this is no New Age cliché. It comes from Meister Eckhart, as taken up by Heidegger, and becomes vital in Daseinsanalysis. In an age where we are constantly told to manage, optimize, and control every aspect of our lives, the idea of "letting be" feels almost rebellious. It challenges our modern instinct to step in and fix, to adjust, to interfere — and instead invites us to step back.

It's a term that carries not just a meaning but an entire attunement — a way of standing in the world. When we hear it, we're not just dealing with a dictionary definition but with something that shapes how we are with things.

Dear Miles, let's start at the root... Where does this word come from, and why do you think Heidegger saw it as so central?

2) Origins: Eckhart, Heidegger and the Memorial Address

Miles: You are correct, we find the word in Meister Eckhart. In his wide reading of Medieval mystics and Medieval philosophy, he encountered it there. But it doesn't really come into prominence for him until his "Memorial Address" in his hometown — a memorial address on the Meßkirch's composer Conradin Kreutzer.

Out of this came a publication entitled *Gelassenheit*. It's worth recalling the full title. Let me give you the exact full title. The "Memorial Address" is actually, in its complete form, "*Gelassenheit*," with the subtitle "*Bodenständigkeit im Atomzeitalter*," which you can translate roughly as "rootedness" or "firm groundedness" in the atomic age. So while the piece is about *Gelassenheit*—and that's how it has come to be known—the subtitle is really important.

In the 1955 "Memorial Address" the notion of being rooted, of having a place where one feels at home in what was then the beginning of atomic age, is central. 1955 was a time when the dreaded possibility of extinction was beginning to take shape throughout the world — increasing worries were about sudden annihilation of entire cities everywhere. As an elementary schoolchild, beginning in about 1952, we were drilled in school about what we should do if the ward siren beeped 21 times and we would not have time to get home. We were instructed to go under our desks and cover our heads. We were told not look at the windows since shattered glass would be flying from them and a light brighter than the sun would penetrate through the openings. We would be blinded if we looked at the light. Air raid shelters were built for public use, outfitted with provisions that would last a certain number of days, after which presumably we would emerge into the real world again. What we would find, of course, was nothing but radioactive rubble. But that was the scenario. Our parents knew about the hydrogen bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945. We had no idea why we were being drilled but cooperated. A vague sense of unease was prominent. The mood in general was one of apprehensiveness. Nothing like a war had happened in the States since its old-fashioned Civil War a century earlier. I mention this because of the timing of address and its reference to the "atomic age" which was already well underway.

It's important to keep this background in mind when considering just why *Gelassenheit* was of central importance to Heidegger beginning then and through the remaining two decades of his life. So, while Heidegger borrows the term from a Medieval Christian mystic, what is in question is the problem of finding a home, a place where one feels at home, where one feels rooted — can stand firm the way a tree stands firm because it's rooted

in the earth — in the atomic age, an age in which people easily go from place to place and increasingly find it hard to say that they belong even to the nation or country of their birth. That image of a tree standing in one's native soil is important for appreciating the term as he adopts it in the Memorial Address.

How does *Gelassenheit* translate? Initially, it came into English simply as "Memorial Address," without translating *Gelassenheit* in the title — this was in the mid-1960s. Inside the text, however, appears the term "releasement" for *Gelassenheit*.

But "releasement" is, frankly, meaningless in English. If you say that word to me — aside from the association with Heidegger — it means nothing. Ask anyone on the street or in academic circles and "releasement" sounds anything but English.

So what does it mean? It has nothing to do with being released from something such a a commitment. The Band once produced a song called "I Shall Be Released." There it meant freed from life. It's quite different from that sense of 'release' because it doesn't really have to do with us as much as it has to do with things. Essentially, Heidegger means — in the broadest sense — leaving things alone: letting go of attempts to control or master them, which is, of course, the project of modern science. So *Gelassenheit* becomes an antidote to the scientific age, which has reached its highest point of danger (so far) in the splitting of the atom and the beginning of the atomic age. Fiddling around with the DNA of living things such a viruses opens an entirely new world of danger.

What Heidegger has in mind is not so much a mood like "serenity," but a way of placing oneself with respect to things around us. *Gelassenheit* is a disposition toward things. As the term was further adapted and adopted for Daseinsanalysis, it became somewhat confusing, because it was associated with a mood and then with a feeling related to that mood. It's said that the Daseinsanalyst ought to assume an mood of serenity — a mood marked by a feeling of peacefulness or brightness [*Heiterkeit*] — you can picture a smiling person untroubled by anything — and that this should somehow be communicated to the analysand. This does not capture the sense intended by Heidegger.

I would prefer to translate the disposition of Gelassenheit as "composure" (and perhaps "reserve") and keep "serenity" for the feeling that might be reflected in a face. Such composure is like the quiet of the Zen master. We may read the mood or feeling suggested as serenity. So, to sum up quickly: for Daseinsanalysis, we're talking about composure as a disposition or attunement — a way of being attuned to things by leaving them alone, not interfering with them. And if you want to picture a face that reflects the feeling associated with it, that's where I would introduce the term "serenity." You can see it in a certain portrait — a kind of Buddha-like countenance.

3) Calculative vs. Meditative Thinking

Rafi: Thank you very much for this part. That's really interesting - you've shown how Gelassenheit is tied to how we stand in relation to things, not in an attempt to master them. This reminds me of Heidegger's distinction between calculative and meditative thinking. Correct me if I'm wrong, but Gelassenheit seems tied to this distinction. Why is calculative thinking so dominant today? What would happen to the world — and to us — if meditative thinking disappeared? And is Gelassenheit a form of thinking, a feeling, or something deeper? I'm asking because in my clinical work, I see people living almost entirely in calculative mode — always planning, measuring, and predicting — and rarely able to stop and dwell in something without trying to control it.

Miles: Well, Heidegger makes this distinction between two kinds of thinking, as you mentioned: calculative and meditative (or reflective) thinking. The first is the domain of science. Individuals who calculate — or "reckon," which is another possible translation ("reckoning thinking") — work with beings, applying the principles of mathematics and mathematical analysis.

This requires the ability to quantify them, and to have rules for manipulating the quantities. If your topic is, let's say, chemical compounds, then applying this kind of thinking can be very fruitful and useful. The same is true in mechanics, biology, and the so-called "hard" sciences, where you can measure things and work with units of

measurement angstroms, inches, feet, pounds, on. The problem with calculative thinking is that it becomes useless—or worse, harmful—when applied to a human being, if we assume, as daseinanalysis does, that nothing essentially human is quantifiable, measurable, and hence manipulable in this way. And yet psychology, for example — and psychiatry built upon it — has been busy doing exactly that since the late 19th century. This gave rise to the whole field of psychometrics, especially evident in "testing" "faculties" such as cognition, feeling, and motivation. Presumably, these have been quantified and measured for quite some time now, and there are hundreds upon hundreds of tests in this vast field, of psychometrics, all rooted in statistics. deeply See the Buros Mental Measurements Yearbook (22nd ed., 2025)

By contrast, meditative thinking reflection that does not attempt to abstract from what is being thought about. Instead, it allows what is being thought to, in a sense, "have its way" with us — to absorb us, that is, so that we become absorbed in it.

To try to say what reflective thinking is means is difficult. If you know Heidegger's work, you will recall that the last full course he gave, after returning to teaching following a long break, was What Is Called Thinking? That title itself can mean, "What do we call thinking?" but also, "What calls for thinking?" or "What calls upon us to think about?" Heidegger offers no definitive answer to the question. We have to read between the lines, drawing our own conclusions about what meditative thinking might be since it is at work in the lectures. In the course, Heidegger first examines Nietzsche — representing, in a sense, the end of the Western philosophical tradition — and then turns to Parmenides, effectively the beginning of that tradition. He plumbs both thinkers for an answer to his question. Being the kind of thinker he is, Heidegger demonstrates meditative thinking without defining it.

So, in the end, what we have is an experience [*Erfahurng*] of thinking, one we can later reflect upon. We have thought along with him and then realized that this was his intention all along — throughout all his lectures – to think along with him. Lecturing, not essay writing, was his real forte. His most personal book is *From the Experience of Thinking*, which his son edited on Heidegger's instructions, covering examples of meditative thinking form 1910-1976.

Meditative thinking, then, can be demonstrated, experienced, but it cannot be described, defined. This may remind you of daseinanalysis. This might sound arcane, but it's not. Both are like swimming: you can read about it and define it, but to know it, you have to get into the water. Watching it demonstrated by an experienced swimmer can help, as in the case of daseinanalytic preparation. Heidegger's only request is that we "get in the water" — that we have the experience — rather than concern ourselves with a formal definition.

This is because he was never not a phenomenologist. And this is where phenomenology differs so dramatically from science. As a side note, this is where Heidegger broke from his teacher, Husserl, who believed phenomenology should be the "strict science." Their split was largely over this very issue.

In phenomenology, we're talking about an experience, not something that can be neatly defined. Take love, for example: you can look up its definition in a hundred dictionaries of a hundred different languages, but when you close the book, do you really know what love is? No — you can only experience it. If that is a limitation, so be it.

The same applies to meditative thinking: you can engage in it by avoiding the attempt to control the process. And here's where the connection to Gelassenheit becomes clear. By letting go in this way, you are already in the mode of meditative thinking. The two, as you suggested, are closely related.

4) In Practice: Gelassenheit in the Therapy Room

Rafi: Wonderful. Thank you very much. We've looked at its roots and philosophical contours, but the challenge — for me, and I suspect for many listeners — is how to embody this in the therapy room, where the instinct to

help, to direct, or to intervene can be so strong. What does Gelassenheit look like in real therapy, and why is "letting be" more powerful than intervention?

Miles: Here again, we're up against the question of experience. People who come to me for Daseinsanalysis often tell me they've read about it — that's why they chose me rather than someone else to consult with— and they ask, "What is it? How is it different?" I tell them, "Well, take your ease. Put your feet up, get comfortable on the couch. I'm going to sit here and look toward the window. When you're ready, talk to me about whatever comes to

And then there's often some silence. Sometimes people will say, "But you didn't answer my question." "It is a question," I say. "As you go on and I follow, you'll see." In practice, as you see, this approach diverts the focus of therapy — as it's generally understood — away from a set of procedures, techniques, or rules to follow. If you read Medard Boss's books on daseinanalysis, you'll see that one of the things he says again and again is that there is no technique to be learned. This is unlike psychoanalysis, family therapy, rational emotive behavior therapy, or any of the other psychotherapy modalities — all of which have defined methods. There's even a specific technique for primal scream therapy. But here, in daseinanalysis, there is no technique. That worry — the anxiety of the individual who feels they need to learn "how" to do something — quickly disappears into the conversation that follows. Often enough, as I said, there's a bit of silence, but then the person continues. We're now underway. In some cases, there's resistance — a concern about not having a clear-cut answer to "give" the analyst. At that point, I might say, "Perhaps there are no clear-cut answers to be found. But there are questions to be raised — you'll raise them, I'll listen, and we'll talk about them. Perhaps this is more about finding better questions than

I think that might help orient listeners to what the experience is like when this matter comes up in a session.

answers."

5) Freedom & the Open Hand

finding

Rafi: Okay, thank you. That's a very clear explanation. It makes me think about freedom and the will. You're trying to enlarge the person's capacity for freedom — for free thinking, free associating — as I understand it. And as far as I know, I might be wrong, but freedom is very important for you. If you were to pick one ultimate goal of Daseinsanalysis, I would bet that you would choose freedom. And that's interesting because therapy often claims to be about helping, guiding, even "empowering" people — but those very actions can subtly take away freedom by shaping people in the therapist's image. Do you think freedom is associated with Gelassenheit? We are often told to think of freedom as choice, but if I'm not mistaken, Heidegger suggests something more paradoxical — that true freedom lies in letting be. What are your thoughts on this?

Miles: If I grab something — if I grasp it — is it free anymore? No. Right? It's in my grasp. Whether you think of this grasp as a concept or as literal, physical holding something, the point is the same. So, Gelassenheit is hands-off but also about hands open — it's about keeping the hand open. The hand naturally tends to grasp, but in daseinanalysis, that tendency to grab onto must be resisted. In a sense, this gesture of the open hand is a metaphor for freedom, which is the goal of daseinanalysis: it's a hands-off, open hand — a hand that does not wish to control, that shows itself as human, as open, the hand in its natural position, slightly curved, but open. But it's not а closed hand fist; it's or а an open palm. And if some of those listening again think of the Eastern traditions, they'll find this image of the open hand is quite common. Again, I would say that if and when we want to speak of a goal for daseinanalysis, it is freedom. But not only the freedom of the analysand, but also the freedom of the analyst. This shared freedom creates the atmosphere in which daseinanalysis takes place. It's therefore as much about this atmosphere as it is about a specific goal for the individual. It is about opening up possibilities that may have been foreclosed, echoed by the hand of the open analyst. And let's not forget that daseinanalysis is concerned with the freedom of both the analysand and the analyst.

Perhaps the best way to approach this might be from another angle: I cannot make someone free. If you're asking whether the daseinanalyst is in the business of providing people with freedom — "setting them

free" — I would say that's a mistake. Freedom is not something I can give to someone like handing them a glass of water, or a pill if I were a psychiatrist. It's only something the person can take on and assume for himself. The most I can do is to embody freedom in my own stance as an analyst. This is where the freedom of the analyst comes into the picture that I just mentioned. And this embodiment can be contagious — communicable, in fact — like a virus passed from one person to another. That's a lousy metaphor, but it's correct to say there's something "in the air" in daseinanalysis and this is what's communicated between the two partners, emanating from the analyst.

But to continue with the virus comparison, if you put someone carrying the flu virus in a room with four others, it's not guaranteed all four will catch it. Some are open to it; some are not. Freedom works the same way. So, freedom cannot be handed over, but it can passed along, and it is embodied by the analyst. It lives in the way the *analyst* experiences the situation. This can be picked up by the analysand — maybe not the first, second, or even third time the two meet, but eventually, if there is enough time for it to unfold, the analysand may "catch" freedom. That's why the freedom of the analyst must come up in a discussion of daseinanalysis. His task is to live it – his freedom – in the room and hope it's contagious enough to be caught by the analysand.

6) Responsibility, Law & the "Third Person" in the Room

Rafi: People often place some form of responsibility on the therapist. A so-called patient comes to your office, and you're supposed to — in quotation marks — "take care" of the so-called patient. And yet, this expectation seems at odds with the letting-be we've been discussing. It assumes that the therapist should step into the driver's seat — rather than creating space for the person's own unfolding.

Miles: Am I responsible for what happens during an analytic session? Only in the sense that I have to monitor it in terms of the realities of everyday life — of which the session is only a part, maybe 50 minutes in a 24-hour day once a week.

Monitoring does not mean I'm responsible for what happens in the session. That would mean attempting to control the other person's behavior or experience — which is precisely what I avoid. All I do is keep track of the practical realities of life in a capitalist society.

As for the analysand's responsibility for what he does — that is entirely his. If he wishes to leave, that's fine. If he wishes to stay, that's fine, too. If he tells me something frightening or disturbing, that he is considering suicide for example — then, legally, I may be obligated to intervene. In most jurisdictions, if someone expresses intent to harm themselves or another, professionals — whether licensed psychiatrists, psychotherapists, or other licensed practitioners, including public school teachers in the States — are required to notify the authorities. That might mean calling the police, or an EMT, or someone tasked with bringing the person to safety. But here's where a problem arises: at that moment, there are suddenly three people in the room — you, the analysand, and the policeman (or his equivalent, whether a uniformed officer, a plain-clothes responder, an ambulance driver).

I'm not sure that such intervention is best for reflecting on mortality, however — and this is a question that, from a daseinanalytic perspective, is always present. Heidegger's being-toward-death makes this clear: mortality is always ours, always present, even if latent. In a sense everyone is always considering suicide. It's not an aberration but and existential. It's not something that only arises in "disturbed" people. In some sense, we are always asking ourselves: Do I wish to be alive, or do I wish not to be alive? Having under the law to report suicidal thinking would disrupt the daseinanalytic process. This is a huge issue.

Rafi: That makes sense. So, just to clarify in very simple words — what would you say is the responsibility of a Daseinsanalyst?

Miles: Well, again, I don't think there is any "responsibility." The analyst (if this is an adult) is the only one responsible for his life insofar as he could take it away from himself. In daseinanalysis there's only a monitoring

function — monitoring the session, monitoring the situation according to the clock on the wall, the fact that other people are waiting to see me, and that the person has to go home or to work.

7) The Analytic Setting & "Encounter" (Dasein-Dasein)

Rafi: By "situation," do you mean the setting?

Miles: Yes — the analytic setting, which is very, very different from any other. And I think this difference is not sufficiently appreciated, just how dramatically different this encounter is. Medard Boss preferred the word encounter over "meeting" or "interaction" or confrontation, but spoke of an encounter in which we're not first and foremost talking about "Rafi and Miles," "Miles and Rafi," or "analyst and patient," but rather Dasein meeting Dasein — embodied, respectively, by you and by me.

It's very difficult to change the mindset and think about the other in this way, rather than as "Rafi" or "Miles" who are ontic realizations of one ontological given, Dasein — each of us is, in that sense, a representative or embodiment of the one Dasein, actualizing it in each of our lives.

On this matter of the ontological difference and much more, I recommend that everyone pick up Thomas Sheehan's paraphrase of *Being and Time* because (Volume 1, with the second volume to follow soon), since for the first time since the 1962 English translation, real clarity has been brought to Heidegger's 1927 text. Sheehan avoids the purely dictionary-style or overly poetic renderings — though Heidegger sometimes demands the latter — and offers insight into the background of many questions you've raised today.

8) Love, Letting-Be & Therapeutic Eros

Rafi: Okay. Thank you. That sounds simple, but I guess it isn't. Because our responsibility is not to search for an underlying dynamic, an unconscious dynamic, of the "patient" — because we don't see patients and we don't work with "the unconscious." We are not monitoring countertransference or transference, as we don't acknowledge these concepts as true. We are monitoring the setting.

Apart from the above, we are simply letting be. And again, this reminds me of love understood not as possession, but as what the medievals — and later phenomenologists — saw as willing the other's being. Amo – volo ut sis... Would you say that at the heart of Gelassenheit is a kind of love?

Miles: Part of daseinanalysis, yes, involves a kind of love — what has been called the Therapeutic Eros. Medard Boss used this term, borrowing it from Carlos Alberto Seguin. That was a classic moment in the history of daseinanalysis. Oh, and before I forget, I should add one more point on the issue of responsibility you raised and that "third person" in the room. I can imagine it's crossed many listeners' minds: What if a person says, "I'm going to go home and drown my children," or "I'm going to go home and shoot my husband"? What if there's talk of doing harm to another?

This raises a very different question, and it steps outside the frame of daseinanalysis. I've heard people express ill feelings toward others — "I wish this person weren't on the face of the earth." But I have never heard someone say, "I'm going to go home and shoot my husband" or "drown my children." If that is said, what should the daseinsanalyst do? My responsibility at that point would be to say, "We're finished for today. You need to go — and consider very carefully what you've just been fantasizing about." It is, after all, a fantasy, not a threat, as if equivalent to his saying to me: "I'm going to shoot you with a gun I have in my pocket." But I would stop the session for the same reason that I stop any session, because at a certain point there in every encounter where there is a line to be drawn between the analytic situation and the real world – namely, when the hour is up. If someone talks about abuse involving children, minors, we have to step outside the analytic frame for the same reason. If a person involved in such talk is under legal age and incapable of caring for himself — and in a certain sense, of course, that's all of us at certain points! — the situation must be addressed in the "real world." If it's a five-year-

old or a ten-year-old being discussed in this way, we must break from the frame. Such fantasies of harming the helpless break the "fourth wall," as people in the theatre call it.

Often such talk appears in the form of anger, yelling, "I hate this person, I wish they were dead." These expressions vary in weight across languages, but when they are uttered they must *not* be taken outside the analytic context. These of *façons* de *parler* and demand from the analyst a question such as: "And just how might they die?" This does not trivialize them but calls for their further description.

The further problem here regarding minors is the nonsense of believing that someone suddenly becomes legally responsible for himself (including sexual consent) at 14, 18, or 21. There are plenty of people at 50 or 60 who are, in effect, still "children" — incapable of caring for themselves. My remark that "we are all children" in this sense is not a joke. It is a fact and may only show up when we are in a dire situation or when ill, but it is there. My point is that the child/adult distinction is phenomenologically ambiguous and only formally meaningful, that is, with respect to the prevailing laws where one lives and the circumstances of the times. When a war is going on, for example, the niceties of our many civil niceties are suspended.

Practically speaking, if you are subject to the law, you must follow it. If it involves a minor who cannot leave a harmful situation without your intervention, you must act. But here you intervene as a citizen and you intervene in the social architecture. Of course, as a therapist, even if I thought of myself as chiefly "interventional," I could not do what a police officer can do — investigate, remove a child, take them to safety. Unless I were to fashion myself a vigilante. So, in that sense, the question is moot.

That said, these extreme cases are rare, though they receive disproportionate attention. Moreover, they are worth considering and worth understanding in terms of why they draw such focus. Perhaps we can talk about this more at another time.

Briefly, I think it is common sense that we are talking in these situations about what happens when I get up from my chair and the analysand gets up from the couch and we face each other. Now we are just two citizens. In the daseinanalytic postures, however, we are not. We are Dasein and Dasein. This is unique.

9) "Interventional Care" vs. Letting Be

Rafi: Thank you for extending and elaborating on this topic — this division between interventional care and "way-making" care, caring for. Do you often practice interventional care? Because in the example you gave, you stopped the session right away and said very seriously that the person must rethink what they have just threatened.

Miles: Again, I wouldn't even call it an intervention, because the session is over at that point. It's the same, as I've just said, as when you reach the end of the 50 or 60 minutes and say, "Let's take a pause here," or "Perhaps this is a good place to stop for now." That's it. That's all for then. Now he puts on his shoes and his cap and goes out into the street — and I go do what I have to do. This is why I have no problem with "small talk" in the minute or so after a session. By the way, I do not engage in small talk as the analysand is preparing to lie down. Again, you must see the vital importance of the use of the couch. While he prepares to put his feet up and relax, I adjust my chair, turn off the air-conditioner (if it's summer), make sure the cat is comfortable and not trying to usurp the analysand's position. Yes, I have a cat in my consulting room and she is quite used to making room for analysands. I often wonder about Freud's chow – a dog – who wandered through his consulting room. Dogs tend to intervene more unabashedly. Cats don't. They're all right with taking a neutral position, as long as they are comfortable. That says something more about the analyst's "position" in the consulting room.

So, we don't live in a daseinanalytic atmosphere all the time. It's a rare and unusual circumstance, just as the psychoanalytic situation was rare and unusual when it was first modeled.

Rafi: So, can you tell us about situations in your practice where you really intervened? Were there any?

Miles: In a strictly daseinanalytic setting? No. I can't think of any such examples.

Rafi: So, you're familiar with the concept of interventional care, but you don't practice it?

Miles: Not at all. Oh my gosh — I think it takes away care from the person, as Heidegger expressed such a form of *Fürsorge*. To intervene is to steal care from that person, to prohibit or close off the possibility of his own care about things in general. This possibility must always be allowed.

Rafi: That's good. I would like our listeners to remember this: to intervene is to steal.

Miles: Yes.

10) Closing & Final Reflection

Rafi: It's been a very extended episode today, and I'm very glad we've covered so many aspects of Gelassenheit. Thank you very much for this.

Miles: You see how easy it is to end? It's very easy to end — and one can do it with a smile. It doesn't have to be harsh. I am, of course, alluding to daseinanalytic sessions. I would just add, as a little footnote, that one thing daseinanalysis does for therapy is to lighten it somewhat.

This is not about making light of things or taking them less seriously. On the contrary — it's about taking them more seriously, but less authoritatively, but without assuming that I, as the analyst, "know best" or that I can fully understand another human being's experience. I can never truly understand the experience of another being — no one does. Just as I can never fully understand my own. It's an ongoing, asymptotic approximation. It's the way life goes on, inside or outside of the daseinanalytic situation.

And I think everyone realizes that, and keeps it in mind all the days of their lives.

Miles: Well, thank you.

Rafi: Thank you very much — and see you in the next episode.