Mark Nepo: The Half Life of Angels
by Tami Simon

What follows is the syndicated transcript of an Insights at the Edge podcast from SoundsTrue, with Tami Simon and Mark Nepo. You can listen to the audio version of the conversation here.

Tami Simon: In this episode of Insights at the Edge, we have with us a beloved poet, storyteller, spiritual teacher, and friend, Mark Nepo. Let me tell you a little bit about Mark. He’s been called—you ready for this? — one of the finest spiritual guides of our time, and I think it’s true. In his 30s, Mark was diagnosed with a rare form of lymphoma, a struggle which helped to form his philosophy of “experiencing life fully while staying in relationship to an unknowable future.”

Mark’s the author of more than 20 books and 16 audio projects, many with Sounds True. He’s the author of the number one New York Times bestseller, Book of Awakening, and he’s now released a new collection of his poetry. It’s called The Half-Life of Angels: Three Books of Poems, and we’re here celebrating the release of The Half-Life of Angels. With that, Mark, welcome.

Mark Nepo: Thank you, Tami. It’s so wonderful to be with you. I’m so excited about... I remember a few years ago talking to you about when this was first starting to percolate in me to put this book together, and though I’ve published so many books, been blessed, I really feel close to this one.

TS: I have to say, Mark, you say that about every one of your book children, and fair enough, fair enough, and for good reason. You have such a special gift at coming up with titles for your work. I love the titles. I’m curious to know, one, how you come up with the title and then tell us a bit about this title, The Half-Life of Angels.

MN: Yes. So the titles are very intuitive. After I’ve been in relationship with whatever the book is about, at some point, an image or a feeling, something will just ring more true than everything else, and it’s almost like finding an anchor. And I know that’s it. With this one, this came before I had any sense of what it meant. I just knew The Half-Life of Angels, that that was it. As I finished putting the book together, and this is so much what the poems are for me, they ring true and then they become my teachers, and I have to
stay in relationship to understand what it is I am to learn.

I’ve discovered more as I go on that this creative process is really the introspective process. I just happen to write it down. So The Half-Life of Angels is really that spark of becoming, of spirit. We know the traditional God and Adam by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel, that little space. It’s like the synapse of spirit, that spark of life force between all things. That’s the half-life of angels. So all the poems in these three books, in this one volume, explore and affirm that mysterious spark of becoming.

TS: Now, Mark, you said something really interesting, that you “received” the title, if you will, and you weren’t even sure what it meant when it first came to you. I had a moment of like, “What? So he’s writing like a scribe.” I think people have different explanations for this kind of thing if they’re engaging in some kind of automatic writing or something like that, and some people say, “Oh, that was a guide. It was outside of me. I didn’t even know what it was,” but you don’t really use that language. How do you understand it? You received a title...You didn’t create it from your discursive mind. Something else was happening.

MN: Right. So I feel like for me, I’m not channeling, but I am not the sole creator either, that it’s all about relationship. I am in relationship, through my authenticity, with everything that’s not me. I feel like this has taught me in my own life that our authenticity is how we clean out the conduit of who we are so we can connect with spirit and with others.

So I like to say I retrieve poems and books. I’m not channeling, I’m not a blank conduit, but I’m not the... This is the fallacy of the West, is we want to be little gods, “Oh, I created out of nothing.” Well, it’s not that either. That through this relationship, I am open enough.

Another image that comes to me is an inlet, that the greater water flows through an inlet and then it can irrigate the land on the land side of the inlet. Well, if that inlet is blocked with debris and stones, nothing gets through. Our authenticity cleans out the inlet that is us, each soul, and then we are informed by the rest of life and we grow for it.

TS: Now, this notion of our authenticity, “That’s what’s meeting everything that’s not me.” That’s what you said. In a moment I’m like, “What does that mean exactly, ‘It’s my authenticity’?” How do I know that I am resting in my, quote, unquote, “authenticity” or being in my authenticity?

MN: Well, and it makes me think, when you use the word rest, it makes me think of in the Buddhist sense of faith, I think the word is sanha, which means resting the heart in what is true. So what does that mean for me? So that means for me that I try to move at the pace of what is real, and being authentic to me means being true to the full range of my feelings, whatever that might be. I might be afraid, I might be confused, I might be in pain, but when I’m truthful about it, that connects me like a root going into the soil. it
connects me to the rest of life, and then I get strength from that and I get clarity from that. If I am not authentic, I get clogged up.

I mean, it’s also interesting that in ancient Chinese, the closest word to translate for “sin” is not “evil,” it’s “opaqueness.” It’s when we’re blocked from seeing or blocked from being true. Being authentic, also from the Greek, it means “the mark of the hands.” So being authentic is how the heart comes into the hands, how inner comes into the world. If I love you and you fall down in front of me, well, I’m trying to prevent your fall or pick you up. So what’s in here comes out here, and that’s being congruent. I’m not just saying I love you. When you fall, I’m showing I love you.

TS: The mark of the hands.

MN: Hands.

TS: I find that so beautiful. Mark Nepo, that’s so beautiful. In coming to our conversation, I realized the question I really wanted to ask you about. Yes, I want to hear and have our listeners hear some of the gorgeous poetry in The Half-Life of Angels, and also, I want to talk more about the process of writing poetry for you, but the question that lived in my heart in coming to this conversation has to do with the heart.

What I wanted to know is, how do you return to your heart and deepen your sense of residing in the heart when you find yourself outside of that experience? Because you’re talking here about the heart flowing through our hands, and I think this is what I feel in you in your work.

Just to say a little bit more, sometimes people are authentic, but there doesn’t feel like there’s a whole lot of heart in it, meaning they’re authentic of just telling you what the heck’s going on and they’re venting and all of this, but there’s something different about this quality of heart flowing through the hands, and that’s what I want to hear more about.

MN: So I feel like I have learned, and I could say it this way that mysteriously, there’s been a handful of times in my life, like all of us, when my heart’s been shattered, and I had no idea how I was going to move forward or how it would be put back together. I was sharing, I recently turned 72. So far, maybe it’ll be different next time, but so far, I can report, mysteriously every time not only has my heart come back together, it’s been larger, stronger, gentler, and more loving.

Now, I don’t exactly know how that works, but I am a student, a lifelong student of that mystery. So now to me, I think all of us, the harshness of life pushes us away. Fear and pain make us tighten, and then whatever our practice is, our job then is to open when we tighten and to lean in when we’re pushed back.

So there is a powerful beauty in admitting the truth of whatever I’m going through, even if I’m in pain, that opens up my heart again. If I’m sad and I refuse it, things get worse. If I
say, “Oh, I don’t want to be sad,” well, mostly that’s happened because I already am and so I need to admit it. The word admit both means to confess or acknowledge, but it also means let in, admit.

So when I am truthful about my feelings, I am not only acknowledging the beauty of what is, even if it’s difficult, but then I’m also letting in other life. So when I am confused or troubled or in any way — because I think we all move because we’re human, I’m committed to being wholehearted. Of course, there are times I’m halfhearted. I commit to being centered. Of course, there’s times I’m off-center. So much of the heart helps us return. So much of any practice to me is a practice of return.

So if I’m confused, I’m sitting here in my study — I’m in pain or in fear, I try to hold nothing back, open my heart, and give my heart’s attention to the nearest peace of life until it becomes my teacher. And that always makes me more intimate with life, and it connects me to more resources.

TS: So Mark, tell me about that, putting your attention on the nearest piece of life. Are you saying the nearest piece of life could be the—

MN: Yes, absolutely, like a fly on the window, or the leaf outside here on this tree that’s just starting to bud because it’s spring, or all of a sudden Zuzu, my dog, is here and I’m stuck looking at her golden lashes for five minutes. [LAUGHS] So whatever it might be, and this goes to that synapse, that spark of becoming, the half-life of angels that that’s a placeholder for, is when we are authentic and our heart is open, it’s like when wires connect and then electricity comes through. That’s how we connect to the network of life force that flows through all relationship, all relationship. We can find these things in the simplest places.

I was just mentioning, this is a quick story that when I was recently at the Modern Elder Academy down in Mexico, this wonderful place, and just before the retreat started, in the morning (it was starting at night) I was walking on the beach and one of the participants was walking and she came over and she said, “I know we’re not starting. I don’t want to intrude. Can I ask you something?” I said, “Sure, sure.”

She said, “Well, this thing just happened on the beach and I don’t know how to feel about it,” which I love that that was her, “I don’t know how to feel about it.” That’s a beautiful openness, and here’s this piece of life that give our attention. So she was walking on the beach and there was a sizable fish that had been washed up on the surf and she was like, “Can I save it? If I don’t, will it just become part of the food chain?” She found a piece of driftwood, she put it back in the surf and she walked another five minutes and there was another one. She said, “I don’t know how to feel about this.”

So there’s an example of a piece of life, giving her attention fully, and then she reached in relationship to another and together we explored it. What came from that exploration from my heart was optimists or idealists say, “We’ve got to save every fish,” and pessimists say, “You’re not going to save every fish, so why bother?” But I think the beauty of this spark of becoming, of this commitment to life, is we’re not here to save every fish and we’re not here to turn away. We’re here to save the one fish in front of us and keep going.
Mark, in terms of the process of receiving poems, how does that relate to giving your full attention to something in the environment that’s calling to you? What’s the connection there?

Well, the connection is, and this goes back to you know that in my 30s I almost died from a rare form of lymphoma, and one of the great gifts from surviving and still being here was that I was given the lens of the miraculous. So as a young writer, young artists, we’re all taught, be on the look for good material. Will this make a good story? Will this be clever? Will this be insightful enough?

Well, after almost dying and still being here, I don’t have to look for good material. Everything’s miraculous if my heart is open enough and I’m present enough to receive it. Abraham Maslow talked about peak moments. We all have these moments that glow. Well, everything is always emanating spirit. We’re seldom in a place where we’re still enough long enough to say, “Oh, my God, look what’s happening.”

So in terms of receiving or retrieving or being aware of what’s worth putting words to, all I have to do is still myself, and this is where meditation practices and the creative process are very much akin. Before I knew about meditation, I think I was meditating but I was just taking notes even though we’re supposed to drop all thought, because when I was in that alive space, things presented themselves that I, in wonder, was bearing witness to and wanting to have a trail that I could … because most of those moments are very ephemeral.

So when I was a young man, I wrote because I’d see something. I’d go, “Oh, my God,” and it was gone, and I’d say, “Well wait a minute, I didn’t get it. Wait.” So I would do a word picture of it so I could have it to be with it longer, and so I could be with it and be in relationship with it.

If we are receiving what’s before us, this changes the notion of revision. We think of revision, all writers and other artists talk about that crafting thing in different ways, but it’s the same process of honing things, pruning language, making it economical and clear. Well, that’s fine, but in the way that we’re talking, I’ve understood revision as going back and looking again at the original vision, re-vision, because now, if I write something and it needs a lot of work, before I put all that work in, I go, “You know what? I wasn’t present enough or openhearted enough. Let me go back and try it again,” because the closer I am to being clear and openhearted, the less I have to mess with the words.

Now, in the context of The Half-Life of Angels, this collection of poems, what was it like for you, Mark? Here you are, you mentioned at 72 you’re looking back at decades of writing and you’re selecting hundreds to go into this volume. My understanding is that this is the first of a multi-volume series of looking back at your … How did you know, especially with this notion about re-visioning, “Oh, this poem needs to be re-visioned. I’m not going to include it,” or, “I’m going to rewrite it”? How did you sort through all that?
MN: Well, it was very interesting, and after all these years, it was very clear what was worth keeping and what wasn’t, very clear. So one way that I noticed was, especially when we’re young, it’d be like, I’d be diving in the deep and want to bring up a treasure. Of course, whatever I brought up I thought was so special, I didn’t want to let any of it go, but now, all these years later, I can see, “Oh, here’s the gem, but there’s a seaweed around it and a tire, and actually, I don’t need all that. It’s just the gem.” So it was very clear. My new guidance for writers is just wait 20 or 30 years. It becomes very clear.

One of the things I was committed to in all of this is, I do not want to revise my earlier work to make it look like I’ve always seen and known what I see and know now. I want to be faithful to the evolution of a spirit in a body, in a life on earth. So I want to bring my skill to make what I saw then as truthful as possible, but not to alter it because I think it’s not that who I was... We all experience this. Who I was 20 years ago, I was as truthful as far as I could see and be. So now that I see more and feel more, it’s not that that was false, it was partial, and now it’s like concentric circles. It’s grown. So it’s being as truthful with each circle as possible so that the natural growth is visible.

I think the other noticeable thing, which was so interesting, and I don’t know where this shift happened, but earlier, it was like I would dive down and want to bring something up from the deep to share, but somewhere along the way, I live in the deep now, and so I no longer bring things up. I invite you to come down and see it with me, and that’s change, and one isn’t better than the other, but there’s a very different tone. The poems in this book are from my 50s and 60s. So in the last 20 years, that’s a very different tone of speaking and living from the deep than diving and coming up.

TS: I wanted to read one thing that you wrote about this new collection, The Half-Life of Angels. You write, “I confess that reading through 45 years of poems has been like stepping through holy sites and ruins in order to map the learnings of all of my former selves.” The part that I wanted to pull out and talk about is this notion of our former selves. I think sometimes we have this idea that, “I’m critical of my former self,” or, “I don’t even know where the line stopped between my former self and my current self.” So I’m just curious how, through this process of sorting through 45 years of poetry, have you developed a relationship with your former self that you think is holding a becoming spirit, if you will?

MN: Yes, and I think that’s a wonderful question and I think it really pertains to all of us. I just happen to experience it through the trail of all my writings, but I remember there was a rabbi, Jonathan Omer-Man, and I’ll never forget his definition of integrity was “to stay true to a voice inside that doesn’t change, though the life that carries it will.” So I think there is an abiding voice within us, whatever we call that — soul, atman, dharma nature, whatever we call that. Of course, the life that carries it does change.

So a key moment when I started to understand the evolution of self was after my cancer journey. Because before my cancer journey, I was a driven young artist, and I was so glad to still be here, of course, but afterwards, it was very confusing because I lost my drive, and I thought, “Where’s my gift?” It took me several months, almost a year to start to acclimate and realize I was no longer driven, I was now drawn to things, and there was a greater freedom in that.
So that changed, that my identity before the cancer journey was Poet with a capital P, but afterwards, it was very confusing because it didn’t fit the … The spirit I am would not be contained by that identity. My means of seeing and perceiving is always a poet, but it serves this unnameable spirit inside. So the image that came to me of a self-growing, is it’s like a potted plant. We all know that if you take care of a potted plant, you have to repot it because it grows. If you don’t, its roots will get all rootbound and it’ll die. It’ll suffocate and die.

So my initial self of Poet with a capital P identity, this transformative process of almost dying, which caused me to be more authentic and raw, I needed to repot myself. I needed to break the pot with the capital P Poet, and it was a bigger pot that was, I don’t know, spirit, something that used poetry. So I think that it’s like with a butterfly, when a butterfly emerges from the cocoon, it doesn’t mean the cocoon was false, it means it served its purpose. So I think we are blessed to go through many cocoons, through many pots, if you will, as our life evolves, as our spirit evolves. It’s the thread or that voice that doesn’t change that connects everything, if that makes sense.

TS: Mark, when I hear you talk about that notion of staying true and that there are times when we know the pot, it’s changing, we may not even be like… It’s just we can feel it’s happening. Sometimes it’s like, “I’m going to make a choice and do this,” and other times it’s like, “Oh, my God, the pot just broke and here we are,” either, but it can be so terribly uncomfortable and difficult and even feel like a type of dissolution, like things are going wrong, not that things are evolving in some positive good direction. I wonder what you have to say to people who are in that state, “I want to stay true, and yet, oh, my God, this is really asking a whole lot of me right now.”

MN: Well, I think two things come to me that have been helpful to me. One is Rilke had this beautiful, of many things, of course, he said so many beautiful things, but he said, “Let everything in, beauty and terror. No one feeling is final. Keep going. Keep going.” So this brings up that the notion, which we all know in the Buddhist tradition, the great lesson of impermanence. Of course, we all think, “Oh, that means we’re all going to die and we will, but not today, hopefully,” but the gift of that within a life is impermanence. Nothing stays the same, the difficulty, the frustration, what feels like paralysis, what feels like being stuck. Yes, it is, and we have to honor what that feels like. Keep going. Keep going. Nothing stays the same.

I think there is an added suffering that comes from resisting suffering. Often, we need each other to get through these difficult moments. It’s natural to say, “Oh, God, I don’t want to go through this,” and then we’ve got to reach to each other and say, “Well, help me through this.”

TS: All right, Mark, let us receive the good medicine of The Half-Life of Angels. When this book first came in the mail, I started thumbing through and reading different poems and marking them and thinking, “I’m going to have Mark read that poem when we talk to each other, and then I’m going to have Mark read that poem, that poem.” Then just the other day I said, “Tami, why don’t you start at the beginning of the book and see what that’s
like?” I did and I had a terrific journey with the first few poems. So I wonder, as a gift to our listeners, can we just start there? Will you read the first few poems?

MN: Oh, a joy. Sure. So this poem, which is the prologue poem for the entire volume, is called The Heart is Still Our Teacher.

The old world is gone and still,
one candle can light many, if we
work with what we’re giving and
resist the suffering in not suffering.

The daily work is to remember
that you can’t fly with one wing.

During adversity, we finally accept
that our kinship is to meet below
all names.

No matter how we stray, we are
taught by the rush of life that,
in the thick of it, we are always
moving toward a greater sense
of living.

It is the blessing of the ordinary
that awakens us to everything.

This poem, which is the beginning of the first book in here, Like It or Not.
Suffering is the bow that plays
the heart. It makes me ache in
a place I knew before birth, a
place we share but only access
when alone.

If we accept the rub, we can hold
each other up to all that life offers.
Perhaps this is the purpose of
suffering, to let music rise.

In time, our suffering sinks like
a stone plopped in a lake,
changing everything, though
it is never seen again.

Changing everything, though it is never seen again. So that’s a good example. Following the truth of that feeling, I didn’t know that poem was going to end up with the image of the suffering like a stone in the lake. So that was the reward for being true to the feeling, and that’s why I say that I write it down and that becomes a creative process, but that’s the introspective process, that reward. If we’re true to our feelings, we will be rewarded with an insight that will help us live. This poem is called Close.

Often what matters doesn’t
reach us until the crisis is over.

How close we were to life or
death makes us tremble weeks
later while watching a goldfinch
eat from the feeder.

Then, we wonder what we’re
doing and if it’s worth all
we’ve put on hold.

Is anything worth this moment
asking to be entered, the way
a waterfall is asked to find
its ledge?

So the instruction of that poem for me was, yes, if we’re true, we’ve got to make the leap like a waterfall. The waterfall doesn’t hesitate. It flows over. It does it. That’s what makes it a waterfall.

There’s just a few more here to open the book. This is Depth Finder.

While we marvel at the dolphin
or whale breaking surface, this great
leap is followed by a great surrender
back into what no one can see.

These surges of power are always
followed by a letting go.

Like the whale, we are never done.
Like the dolphin, we nose our way
into the world, only to plummet
back into the deep.

This one, this is called The Art of Netting, making the word net into a verb, N-E-T, netting. This really came because I so believe, and as you know, Tami, in friendship and being there for each other. So this came because I have a dear, dear friend who years ago helped save my life from cancer, and in the last year, he lost his wife very suddenly, and he’s just been devastated. I’m there for him. I want to be, and it’s bringing us closer. So I have a group of friends here, male friends, who are a men’s group that we’ve been in together for 15 years. They know of my friend Paul, but they don’t know him. They know him through me.

So while I’m helping Paul, they’re helping me. As they see how what holding Paul is affecting me, they’re holding me, and that’s what gave me this sense of netting. So the poem is The Art of Netting.

This is how it works. I almost die.
You’re at my side. It’s hard on you.
And so, your friend is at your side.

Next month or year, it’s you who
falls into the crater. Then, I’m there
for you. And my old friend is there
for me.

This is how a net distributes the
weight, how the net of hearts
distributes the suffering.

Even our dog climbing my wife’s
lap when she cries is part of the net.
Finally, this is We Try So Hard.

We cling to everything—clothes, memories, dreams—so tightly when only burning them will warm us.

We want so badly to come alive when to do so we must die along the way.

And finding love, we want to hide it like a treasure at the bottom of the sea. Instead, life humbles us to be the flag to each other’s wind.

TS: Oh, my. Thank you, Mark.

MN: Oh, a joy to-

TS: Here you are with these thousands, dare I say, of poems, and you’re figuring out, “How am I going to group them? How am I going to sequence them? How am I going to create these volumes?” How did you go about it?

MN: Well, it’s so interesting because, for me, it’s very intuitive. When I put a book of poems together, one book, I will get all the titles, and even the poems if they’re not too long, and I’ll print them all out, and I will, right here in my study, I will put them all out on the floor where I can see all of them, and I’ll get a cup of coffee—

TS: Thank goodness.
MN: —and I’ll just stare at them. I’ll be in conversation with them. Eventually, one will come in the foreground and say, “I’m the first one,” and another one will say, “I’m the last one.” Then in relief, it starts to appear to me, again, using my heart as a Geiger counter, not making sense of it, but following what feels true. So it presents its organic order, and then I’ll put them together that way, and it will start to tell me its structure.

So from that, that’s also how I retrieve and write the nonfiction books. I will have an idea, but I know my idea is just kindling. Not one book I’ve written has ever turned out to be the book that happened. And I know that, and that’s a wonderful thing, that’s not a frustration. So I feel like I’m an inner explorer, and in my movement in the world and with others and with nature, I take fragments and images and pieces of things that ring true, and I gather them like shells along the shore.

Then I will take one at a time and it’s, “Huh,” like the story of the fish on the shore, and I will take that and be with it and unpack it and write around it or through it or under it. Then I start to see a constellation, “Oh, this one goes with this one,” and then that becomes a chapter. So it’s like building a mosaic intuitively from the inside out. So the structure of a book rather than the logical Western way that, “Well, here’s an outline. Now I’m going to fill the outline.” No, rather than bend the material to my intention, I discover and put together all the pieces that feel true and let them tell me what their structure is and their meaning.

TS: It’s unusual, as you said, instead of coming at it with an outline. I pulled this quote, Mark, that is from a previous conversation you and I had that really stuck with me, “I write about what I need to know, not about what I know.” And I thought, “Huh, that’s so interesting.” Most of the time, even if I’m working with an author, it’s like, “Well, what do you know?” Here you are, you’re writing about what you are yearning to know, what’s alive in you to know. So I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that because it’s such an unusual approach.

MN: Well, because I have found that—and this is one of the reasons I’m blessed to be prolific—is that if I wrote about what I know, I would have written very little. [LAUGHS] But this is that expression. You know the book that we did together, Drinking from the River of Light, explores this in great depth is the life of expression is one of discovery, is one of discovery, and by being in relationship and inquiry, we grow, and now there is material worth working with to grow.

I think this is very much a point of great discernment in our modern world, is that so much of the polarization that’s going on is that when people’s lives are governed by fear, they begin to look only for what will confirm what they already know, and that’s not education. Education is, “No, open up the door to what I don’t know. Let me look at something new and interesting and that challenges me.” I think it was William James who said, “Most people when they think they’re thinking are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

TS: Now, here’s something I’d love to know more about from your life, which is when you
were talking about the potted plant and how we can get to this place where, “Yes, the pot’s too small.” What I’ve found just briefly here, confessionally, in my own life is that this keeps happening to me. I keep having to get... and I have this thought of, “OK. Good. I broke out of that pot. It’s over. We did it. Congratulations, Tami. That was rough, but you’re in a new orbit, thank goodness,” and then it happens again, and I’m like, “Really?”

Often when I hear you describe your life journey, you’ll go back and talk about the cancer journey that you went through, and of course, what a huge, gigantic, I don’t want to minimize that in any way, but what I’m curious about is beyond the cancer journey, as you entered your 40s, 50s, 60s, were there other times where you’ve had to break out of a pot that was too small, and what was that like for you? Can you share that with me?

MN: Yes. I think that the pots for me after that were more subtle for me. I mean, my way of relating and inquiring into the world has always been constant since then, but my sense of being more and more inhabiting all the things I’m learning about... I mean, more deeply inhabiting being here, there is no there, there’s only here, all that matters is relationship. You know how the Dalai Lama has famously said his religion was kindness? Well, I think mine is friendship, and living into that more and more.

So the points of when my, I think, going through maybe 10 years ago a handful of deaths of people who were important to me and going through with my parents ... Here’s a very small poem, but this is a good example. I could never have written this poem if I hadn’t ... When I was younger ... I mean, this is a very short poem, but this is a lifetime insight into the irreparable chasm that was always between me and my parents.

Now that they’re gone, I can see them more clearly because now that they’re gone, they don’t make so much noise. They made a lot of noise when they were here and it was hard to see them, but this is called Life Tracks like railroad tracks, Life Tracks.

My mother taught me
how to build a wall.
My father showed me
how to climb it.

They never said so
but they loved the wall
and called it home.

In time, I grew like
a chick in its shell.

Inevitably, I cracked
the wall to live my life.

They never forgave me.

So that was a realizing of, I guess, a crack in the pot, if you will. I think my parents, who were very intelligent people, first born in America, we had family who died in the Holocaust, they grew up in the Great Depression, very concentrated on survival, and very intelligent, but literal-minded, they get a mystical poet for a son. We never spoke the same language. We never spoke the same language. They would voice to me things like, “There isn’t anything you can’t do if you give your all.” Well, I believed them, but I learned later they said that but they didn’t believe it.

So when I came home in my life acting on that, it challenged decisions they made because they didn’t give their all and they didn’t think it mattered. So if they accepted the evidence of what I was doing, they would have to rethink their decisions or maintain their worldview and reject me. So that was a lot of what was going on, but I didn’t know that till recently.

TS: One of the things I’m curious about, Mark, is in your everyday life there in Kalamazoo, what happens when you think, “Oh, a poem’s coming. I can feel it. I’m hearing a poem. Time to sit down at the desk,” or how does it work for you?

MN: Well, it works at... My pattern at home is I’m up early. Susan is a night owl. I’m an early morning, so our creative times are at the bookends of the day, but I’m up and Zuzu’s up. Our dog is up with me and I’m here in my study by 7:00 usually and have some good part of the morning just to be and explore. Then in the afternoons, I try to make sure I go out in the world.

Before the pandemic, I would go to a café. I like cafés. I haven’t gotten back to that quite yet, but I make sure I do errands. I make sure I am balanced.

Often, poems are things that I am... Questions I’m carrying will suddenly come when I’m out and about. So I will stop and either dictate it in my phone or scribble, pull over on the side of the road and scribble. So I’ve always been a lifelong scribbler, and I think it’s the way poets sketch, like artists sketch. It’s the way poets sketch.

TS: I’m going to read this quote from you where you write about poems as teachers, and
you say, “I like to say that I retrieve poems more than I author them. The words are the trail of my ongoing conversation with life. There’s a Hindu word upa guru, which means the teacher that is next to you at this moment.” I thought, “OK. Is there always a teacher next to you?” You write, “There’s always a teacher next to you when we can be present enough with an open heart. The world in all its luminous detail reveals itself as such a teacher.”

MN: Yes. My experience is there is. I’m not always... I don’t get them all. I miss them. I trip over them because we’re human, but the teacher’s always there and it’s like a radio station that sends... It’s always sending the signal even if my receiver has static. I think this is a way to understand functional faith, not faith in a doctrine or a person or a sage or a saint, but faith in life is that whatever difficulty I’m going through or confusion or lack of clarity is no reason for me to paint the world that way. The gift and the teacher is always there.

I mean, another way to look at that is very simply a cloud. When there’s cloud cover, the sun’s still shining. The experience of being under the cloud is real, but it’s not all of reality. So this is where when I’m halfhearted, how do I become wholehearted? How do I return? There are so many teachers that you don’t have to worry or beat yourself up if you miss one. There’s another one right behind it.

TS: OK. One final question for you, Mark. I’ve heard you say as the poet that the real art is becoming the poem, becoming the poem. I’ve got to be honest with you, when I heard you say that the first time I thought, “I wonder what he means,” and I’m going to say it again. What do you mean by that?

MN: Well, what I mean by that is, and I know I’ve shared this with you before that poetry for me is not the words on the page, it’s the unexpected utterance of the soul. It is the poem of authenticity within us and between us. So more and more, in my practice, I want to be committed to being as honest and truthful and real and vulnerable and strong and all of that, and the myriad of things that make us human, as best I can, and to be there for each other, and that’s being the poem.

TS: Mark Nepo, author of the new collection of poems called The Half-Life of Angels. Thank you so much, Mark, for sharing yourself, a poem that you are and your good kind heart, as well as your beautiful writing here on Insights at the Edge. Thank you.

MN: Thank you, Tami. Thank you so much.