

Mark Nepo On Being The Poem by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Mark Nepo is a poet and philosopher who has taught in the fields of poetry and spirituality for over 35 years. He is a New York Times #1 bestselling author and a cancer survivor. Mark devotes his writing and teaching to the journey of inner transformation and the life of relationship. At Sounds True, Mark has created several audio programs, including an eight-CD series called *Staying Awake: The Ordinary Art* and an audio program called *Holding Nothing Back: Essentials for an Authentic Life*. Mark has also created a new nine-month interactive video learning course called *A Pilgrimage of the Heart: Discovering Your Authentic Voice and Inner Courage*. That series launches on March 19th. Mark will also be a featured presenter at Sounds True's annual *Wake Up Festival*, August 14 th-18th, and he'll be offering a two-day pre-festival workshop: *A Journey With No End: On Writing and Spiritual Growth*. In this episode of *Insights at the Edge*, Mark and I spoke about how to relate to our pain and that of others in a way that is truly helpful. We also talked about sincerity as a specific type of intelligence, the role of pilgrimage in our lives, and the spiritual path of the artist. Here's my conversation with Mark Nepo.

Mark, I've found through your writing and speaking and through your presence a heart communication that I really value. And I wanted to begin our conversation, actually, by going right there and talking about the heart. There's a metaphor that you use in your work where you talk about the heart as if it has a gill, or gills like fish. And I was wondering if we could start right there?

Mark Nepo: Sure. Sure. Well, thank you. You I think that my experience has been that regardless of what we think we're after or doing, that we're really kind of moving through life so that we can bump into things that will touch our hearts, that will open our hearts, that will remove everything in the way. Often those things come from great love and great suffering. So to go to, you know, I find teachers everywhere, and often the simplest creatures are the greatest teachers, as is the case with a simple fish. We all learn this in school early that fish are air-breathing creatures but they live in water. And we learn that they have this amazing thing called a gill. It's so kind of obvious, we learn it so early but this is miraculous. This is absolutely astonishing and miraculous.

So a fish moves through the water and the water moves through the gill and the gill somehow, it extracts the oxygen because we know water is hydrogen and oxygen, and discharges the hydrogen. It lets it stream behind it. So this is an amazing teacher because, this is also why fish need to keep moving through water or they will die. They have to have the water go through their gills in order to breathe. So as we talk about this, I'm not talking about motion or stillness, the way we normally do. The fish are these amazing teachers. They are examples of the endless search that has no destination. They are not moving through the water because they are going somewhere. They don't have any agendas or appointments—not that we know of! But they need to keep engaging in

their element or they will die.

So the metaphor, the teaching metaphor here that is just amazing, is that for us, the heart is our gill. And we need to move through the water of experience every day, or inwardly, we will die. And we need to somehow, through first-hand experience, learn how to extract what is essential and discharge the rest. Because when we don't discharge the rest, when we cling and hold onto what is not essential, it starts to clog up the gill of the heart. And we can no longer breathe from what is essential. So this is just amazing.

TS: Let's talk about both parts of this process a little more, this extracting what's essential. Let's start there. How do we do that?

MN: I think there are many ways, and [as] with most things that matter, we should start by offering that they are both universal and very personal. So while all of us need to learn how to do this—we can talk about it [together], but anyone who is listening, if this makes sense, we need to find where that lives in our own personal life. So the way that we extract what is essential is by staying present and not hiding, by trusting over being skeptical. It doesn't mean we can be cautious or prudent! By not rehearsing our way through life, by remembering the quiet courage amid each moment, not only as if it never happened before, because it has never happened before. We all—and I'm talking about this, and do I do this all the time? Oh no. I mean, I try. I try. I try because being human is, you know, we don't do it constantly. My heart gets clogged and then I have to clear it out. And then I have to work on extracting.

I think that the chief way to extract what is essential is having the quiet courage to meet whatever comes our way with an open heart. And if we don't, which is very understandable because fear and pain make us temporarily shut down—that's like a natural, almost biological reflex. But the commitment to open our hearts once they've been closed, to open our minds once they've shut down, to read—just like our eyes blink how many times a day—so when the heart blinks, we have to commit to opening it again.

TS: And this art of discharging what is not needed?

MN: Well, that, that's the art. Every generation has had to deal with it. That, and I think the Buddhist tradition teaches us so well about putting things down, putting down what has already passed, not clinging to our dreams of what we'd like life to be. It doesn't mean we can have goals and that we don't work toward things, but goals and dreaming, I've learned, are the kindling for being alive. It's not so important what the dream is, as that we take the dreams like kindling and throw them into the fire of our aliveness and trust that.

So I think putting [away] or discharging what isn't essential really hinges on not pretending, not hiding. I think we all have this tendency, because we have these amazing minds—you know, we tend to go over things, whether they're good things or difficult things, once they've happened. It's fine, I think to recall, remember—this is how we gain knowledge—to even revel and feel the glow of a beautiful feeling or love or a person and then at a certain point, which is different for everybody and different in every circumstance, I have found that it crosses the line, and now I'm living in the past or the future and I'm no longer here. And those dreams and those memories are not fueling my aliveness, they're distracting me from being alive. So this is a constant, unending part of discharging.

There's another different kind of aspect about discharging and this is also amazing. I was

working on a novel and I wound up needing to research the beginnings of massage and the history of touch, of feeling touch. And it really led to this amazing kind of early understanding that is still a part of the medical healing profession, though most people, I don't think, address it. So early on, the first people to really heal through touch were the priest shamans, the early medicine men and women. There are some early stories that kind of all go like this: there's a healer who recognizes that someone young has the touch and so they begin to apprentice them to become a healer.

And when they learn enough, the basic kind of story goes, then, moved by good heart and by good intention, they go out too soon to heal someone who is ill. Because the two qualities, the twin tasks of healing from the beginning of time, one is to remove the toxins from the patient, to remove the illness. And this was done at first by touch, by rubbing leaves and oils, and chanting. But the second is just as important, and that is, if you have the touch and you remove the toxins, what do you do with it? How do you not keep it so that you don't just get sick, and how do you not be contagious and just transfer those toxins to someone else? So there's another level of discharging that's really important not only in—I mean, let's go to healing first. Today, the soul of the healer, whatever that might be, well, we have a lot of more machines in the way of our touching that help heal. But the heart of the healer still has to tend [with]—what do you do with what comes from those you treat and care for? Where do we put it so that it doesn't make us sick or others sick?

This is also very important in terms of compassion and the role of compassion and healing among loved ones and friends. How do I listen to you with my heart, and if I really do, I'm suffering too because I love you. But how does that become the oxygen we breathe and not the thing that makes us both sick? And I don't know the answer to that.

TS: Yes, I'd be curious to know in your own experience, Mark, because you are such an incredible listener. So I'm sure that all kinds of people come to you and spill their troubles of all kinds. I mean I know I feel it whenever I'm around you. I'm ready to confess God knows what, and I'm sure other people do too.

MN: [Laughs] Well, thanks.

TS: So I'm curious, I'm curious to know how do you work with that? How do you let that flow through you, the pain of other people?

MN: Well, I think one of the, and this is really spoken about very well in the 12-step programs and the whole thing that Melody Beattie brought to light 20 years ago or so about the dangers of codependence. I think a lot of it [occurs] out of good heart—let me just talk whether it's Susan, my partner, or my father who at 93 has just had a stroke and just recovered from pneumonia. I can't take that away from him. So my first impulse is, I want to solve it. I don't want him to suffer. And all that does is make me sick and not able to really help.

I mean, certainly, there are things I can do. When I was with him, I wound up feeding him, which was a very tender unexpected thing—but I can't take his 93 years and the age of his organs away from him. So that leaves us with what? What does it leave us all with? It leaves us being with keeping company. It leaves us with more presence than doing. And then, my heart can open in its strength and be a warmth that he can be in. I think this is a very, and I think this is at the heart. Compassion does literally mean, literally suffering with, or being with, being one with. And the paradox is that while the suffering surely can be so painful, [but] when we accompany each other, we don't take the pain away, but yet

at the same time, we're deeper and larger and enlightened, lighted within for sharing it.

So I think I struggle, I always struggle too with a reflex to problem-solve and care for and protect. And then part of my deciding what's essential and what needs to be discharged is, "Well, what can I really do?" Like, feed food or help my father from the wheelchair to his bed. That's a doing. But what do I need to put down because he's at the end of his life, whether that's a month or two years or three years? How do I really keep my heart open to the honor of that journey?

And that's the journey with everybody. I think often—and again, these are not false. They are understandable constrictions of the heart for being human. At the first kind of being jarred by crisis or difficulty, it's very normal to say, "Wow, I don't know if I can deal with this." Or "Whoa, I need to turn away, this is too painful." But again, it's [a question of], do we return? Do we then relax our heart open and say, "This will be what it will be and we'll all be in it together." So now, OK, I can turn back to it and ask the person who's suffering, "What is this? At first it was hard for me to hear this but I'm here. Now I'm here. What is this like for you?"

I think another thing, Tami, that I'm very humbled and have learned over the years and believe in deeply is that everyone who is suffering in some way, has a wisdom. We are so often afraid of our own mortality or of being with those who suffer that we forget to ask them what they see and hear from the place that they've been brought to. This is especially true of elders. It's as if each of us has a lifetime and we climb a mountain and OK, my father is 93 and I'll just stay with this example. Well at 93, I want to know, what does he see from that far up the mountain that I don't? What does it feel like to have been on this earth that long?

Now, he doesn't talk about things the way I do. [Laughs.] So that opens up a whole other level of compassion—how do I find the language that he's comfortable with? I mean, I get those answers or those questions that way that I would like to ask them. But you know, we had a very deep moment. He was nodding off and I was holding his hand, and he had an oxygen mask on and he stirred. And I squeezed his hand and said, "Hey you know what?" And he kind of looked at me. "I'm glad you're my father." And he just got this big beam[ing smile] under the mask and he said, "I'm glad you're my son." And I was just so thankful for that.

And then he dozed off. And then he kind of stirred again. And then I said [to myself], what's his language? And then I said, "What kind of father was your father?" So then he just kind of started talking about that. So I think so much has to do with opening our heart and meeting people where they are, in their language.

TS: Mark, I want to just share this example with you and hear how you might relate to it, which is, I was with somebody and I would say that gills of her heart were quite stuffed and blocked because of a loss that she had gone through. She was quite bitter about it. And this is someone I really care about. What I found was that there was nothing I could say or do. I tried to meet her in this place of stuckness, but the truth is, I felt sad and frustrated at the end. And I guess what I'm curious is how do you relate to somebody when you can't help them? Your presence doesn't seem to help, nothing seems to help them create flow through their being in the way that you're talking about with the metaphor of the fish.

MN: I think that—and that's very true, and I've also had kind of similar experiences. I think this could speak to the wisdom in the Buddhist notion of seeing things as they are. And

then, still having our heart open, but being willing to discover what that means. The truth is, and again without blaming—you know, this friend of yours might be in so much pain, that it's like drowning under water and they just can't hear you or me above the surface. So if you can't do anything physically, like if someone can't breathe, you try to help them or they're bleeding you call 911. But in these psychic and spiritual and emotional drownings, I think all we can do is just hold the space as long as we can without us going under.

Again, this sense of return, whether we check back in with those people or hold them in our heart and say prayers and whatever things we can leave around, whether they pick them up or not without imposing. I think it's that thing where we will do what we do until we stop. And we may not stop. We may not come up. And it's very sad and frustrating, but this is, I think again, the challenge for all of us is how to be clear and compassionate.

Very often in our society, we're extreme. We're taught either that to have our heart open means well, we're just going to stay there forever no matter what, even if it's frustrating, or even if that person becomes hurtful in their pain. The other extreme is well, OK, they can't hear me, I'm not investing anymore. I'm going to shut my heart down and like that's all I can do. Then we get hard and we walk away. Wow, you know, I guess I'm learning or I want to continue to learn, it's not either/or. It's, how do we keep the heart open and see what is true? Even if we don't say anything to that person, but not to shut down in order to walk away but how to—and I think we're talking about the mysterious realms in a very real, grounded way of OK, how do we practice being a Bodhisattva?

How do we, with whatever little parts each of us has been blessed to awaken and accept and be in life, how do we hold that open to all the parts in other people that are not there [yet]? In that way, I think every person is part Bodhisattva. Every person has some gift and some trouble, and some mature deep awakened part of soul, and some other part that is blind. This is how we kind of pollinate each other in the human spring. We all need each other. The part that is awakened in me may not be in you, and the same thing—where you might be wise and full of amazing soul insight, I might be just blind.

TS: I like that a lot. I like so many things you're saying Mark, I have to be honest. I want to circle back to one point that you made that I've been reflecting on as I'm listening to you, which is this way of communicating about spiritual insights in a way where you're talking very personally and yet you're talking about universal themes. You know you mentioned this, that there's this way of communicating that's both personal and universal. And I'd love to hear you say more about that. And the reason is sometimes I hear people talk and it's very prescriptive and they're sort of like telling me how the world is. And I think to myself, who are you to tell me how the world is?

MN: [Laughs.]

TS: You know? I know you too well for you to listen to how you're telling me to live my life because I know your life is filled with all kinds of mixtures of things. Yet, there's a way when you talk that I feel the universality but it's very personal and it doesn't feel "prescriptive." So I wonder if you can talk about that.

MN: Sure, and that's very important to me as a teacher and a writer. And this speaks to [how] we live in an age that has a cult of expertise. I don't subscribe to that. I feel that the teachers who are real teachers work to open the space where everybody in the room takes turns being the teacher, because we're really called to compare notes at being alive. Therefore, as you've just said, no one can tell anybody how to live. And this is why

at this point in my life, I really have no interest in debate or argument or persuasion. I feel like we need everybody's view to touch on the whole and the oneness and the wonder and the usefulness of all the resources that are in the mystery.

I love in Native American elder circles, they always meet in a circle so that everyone has a view of the center. I feel like it's not just so everyone can see the center, it's so everyone can contribute their view of the center and together they approximate the oneness of things. So, you know, it's very important to me that I offer—and that the circles that I'm blessed to a part of, open up a space where one size doesn't fit all. And I think there's a thing, and this goes way back to when I was a graduate student in English, and there was a Canadian scholar named Northrop Frye. This guy was amazing because he really was kind of like a mystic who just kind of turned out to be a scholar. So one of the things that he wrote about, he defined the difference, which has stayed with me all these years, between significance and meaning.

Significance is only personal. Significance is that the first woman I fell in love with had auburn hair. But meaning, is when I touch under that to the place where everyone who's ever known first love can feel not just that auburn hair when I speak of it, but whatever that was for them. So this goes again to that the difference between significance and meaning is whether we stay in our mind or we dive into our heart.

So this is why I think another kind of thing that really speaks to this that keeps us from comparing notes is when we offer conclusions over evidence—you know, often when people are prescriptive, they're stopping just short of sharing what life is really like for them. So you know, if I got burned as a little boy on a stove and now I develop a whole philosophy about avoiding hot surfaces, and then I tell you "Don't go near hot surfaces," well that's a conclusion rather than sharing the full experience of how I was burned when I was little.

Basically, when we share evidence of our experience, we get closer to others and we have more respect that others can draw their own conclusions. This is why I think one of the greatest, most honest things we can ever say to each other is, "I don't know." Because then we begin a friendship with the unknown.

TS: One of the things I've been curious about is how an artist, a writer, a poet, someone like you communicates spiritual truths in a way that might be different from somebody who says, "I'm a 'spiritual teacher' and I'm offering these teachings from the tradition." I'm curious what you have to say about that—the path of the artist, if you will, as a complete legitimate path for spiritual journeying?

MN: Well, yes, thank you. I think at heart, all of those, every endeavor and vocation if taken deep enough, is the life of a spiritual pilgrim. You know, the word "saint" originally came from the Sanskrit word sant, which meant "truth seeker." So every path at its very deepest is that of a truth seeker and a spiritual pilgrim. So this is why someone like Einstein, though he was a physicist, at the depth and the center, he was a poet and a teacher. So they're just different forms, different mediums, different instruments, but if we hold them with enough love and honesty and truth, it's all the path of a teacher.

So now, in the form that I've been born into, I feel like my job is to see and listen and to share the aliveness that I receive as untouched as I can. I do that through metaphor and poetry and story, and even whatever "spiritual writing" I do, is all aimed at putting things between us as cleanly as possible. I learned this. This is so helpful in this, in what we're talking about. This is the difference between Western approach to art, and an Eastern

approach to art. I learned this through—I've been slowly learning traditional Japanese wood block carving. And my teacher is just this wonderful, amazing artist who has studied in Japan. Her name is Mary Brodbeck. She's just amazing.

One of the first things that she taught us, those of us who are journeying with her, was we looked at all these different examples throughout history but the Western sensibility is one that, if I'm going to draw your face, let's say, I will look at you very carefully and try to not leave anything out. I will try to get every wrinkle and surface and glimpse of your eyelash. I will try to not miss a thing. And then that approximation is you.

The Eastern sensibility is, I'm going to look at you and be as present as I can be until I see the four or five lines that will bring not only your face, but your being into view. And that's going to be the portrait. So that's—I recognize that immediately because that's what I've always tried to do as a poet.

There's another wonderful kind of moment of teaching for me about this, and that was that I've always kind of learned a lot from other art forms. John Singer Sargent, the famous painter from the 1800's—I was in a museum in Williamstown, Massachusetts and there's a painting of his called the "Venetian Interior." It's mostly a dark painting of a woman sitting in a room in Venice and she's kind of looking down. She kind of looks tired, even sad. Off in the corner, there's a little window, and through the window is coming this intense beam of light that lands on her hand, which is on her knee. So while the whole painting is this room, it insists the focus of the painting is the light that's outside in the street, that's beyond the frame of the painting. It becomes a window to a world. When I saw that—I was in my 20's—I said, "That's what I want to do with every poem, every story, with everything I write." I want it to be a window so that you are brought through the window into the reality of life that's beyond the page where we all live.

TS: I love that, Mark, and yet I want to reframe my question in a slightly different way because I want to make sure that you and I are really communicating here, which is, one of the things that I'm noticing in you, which is what I want to highlight, is how somebody could spend years and years practicing as a Tibetan Buddhist or a qigong practitioner or a Centering Prayer practitioner—there could be all these different forms of spiritual practice and that that path of the artist, the path of the poet has its own forms and doorways and takes people to really what we could call the depth of these universal realizations. And that's kind of what I hear in you that to me is so illustrative of something that I think is really important, this path of the artist.

MN: Thank you. I see what you're asking here, and actually this speaks to very much what we've been working on [with] the pre-festival intensive for next August which is going to be on writing and spiritual growth. I've called those two days, "Journey with No End." And that is exactly what that workshop is about, what I understand now is what you were just asking.

It's that the life of an expression is what awakens our soul. So, just as we have to inhale and exhale hundreds of times a day, we have to perceive—which includes thinking and feeling and intuiting—we have to perceive and express constantly. This is how the soul stays awake. And the life of the artist, whatever form, is one of the ways we've been given to spiritually breathe, to practice this. So just as there are so many beautiful meditation practices, and just as the goal of that breathing, of that inhaling and exhaling—it doesn't make it great meditators, it makes us more clear vessels of life.

Well in the same way, writing, expressing, perceiving and expressing—and I'll stay with

writing but it's really any art form—it doesn't make us great artists; it brings us closer to awakening our soul. And I have to say that I was awakened to the difference, through my cancer journey. On the other side of my cancer journey after almost dying and still being blessed to be here, I realized that I was more interested in the expressive journey of healing, than in the production of great art. So that a great work of art, it's totally shifted my definition of that. A great work of art is one in which the person who has expressed it, is transformed for having encountered it. Not whether it's one of the greatest works to come along in this century. Does that get a little more toward [the point]?

TS: Yes, you're really pointing to the process of the artist, him or herself.

MN: Yes. And the reward again for this process—and this is why I love the whole notion of the Tibetan sand mandalas and Navajo sand painters—Diné, I should say, is the tribal name that they prefer for themselves. Navajo is what we Westerners put on them. So the sand painters would create these beautiful sand paintings and then leave and let the wind complete them by erasing them. The Tibetan sand mandalas where these amazing monks will beautifully, over months, create these intricate, amazing, colorful mandalas with different sections of all different colored sand and then in a ritual, wipe it all away, wipe it all away. It's the process that is the art that leads us to the life of the spirit. So the words are really the trail.

Another way to say this which has been very profound for me, is that like any young artist or writer, I wanted to, in a very devoted way, become a very serious poet and maybe, maybe after a lifetime if I was blessed, contribute one or two great poems and add to the lineage and the literature.

Well, you know, life came along and gave me cancer and other things, and turned me upside down and suddenly I started to realize that that fish—you know, tying all the way back to that fish needing to swim through experience to stay alive, suddenly I realized “Oh, I don't really need to create great poems, I need to discover true poems in order to stay alive.” So now everything shifted. Now in my 60's, now it's shifted even yet again. You know what? I wanna be the poem, [laughs] more than write the poem.

Of course, this devotion to this process is the only way that we can get close to that. So every act of love and every act of courage and every act of quiet lifting between human beings and every moment that touches down between a conversation like you and I are having—that's the poem. And any attempt to share it, or preserve it, or record it, is betrayal of the artifact.

There's a great story you may have heard of Buddha talking to his students and saying, “My teachings are only fingers pointing to the moon. Don't get hung up on my fingers, look at the moon.” The real value of any work of art is the invisible, mysterious essence of life it points to—like that moon, not itself.

TS: I want to be the poem. I like that, Mark.

MN: [Laughs]

TS: You come up with a lot of good things.

MN: [Laughs more deeply]

TS: You know, there's one thing I wrote down from listening to the audio series, I was

listening to Staying Awake last night, literally staying awake listening to it. And you talked about sincerity, and you quoted a Chinese saying: “given sincerity, there will be enlightenment.” I wanted to make sure that you and I had a chance for you to talk about sincerity and what this means to you.

MN: Yes, it’s from the Doctrine of the Mean, which is one of the ancient Chinese texts. “Given sincerity, there will be enlightenment.” For me, I hold enlightenment not as a noun but as a verb. That is, the light within is released. The light within is manifest. The light within is made so that it comes alive between us. So sincerity, being authentic, holding nothing back, staying awake, all of these things are part of sincerity, which allows us to manifest the light within us. Again, being human, am I authentic all the time, every part of the day? No. I get tired. I get numb. I get cranky. I forget. I break things. I inadvertently hurt the people I love. Being authentic means I own it and say I’m sorry. Then I’m responsible and responsive to what my actions have created.

So sincerity—and also, I just found that the word “authentic,” goes back to the Greek meaning *authentēs*, which means “the mark of our hands.” That makes so much sense. I’m always surprised and not surprised at the origins of words because to be authentic, to be sincere, is a hands-on job. It’s not in the head. It’s not conceptual. It all has to do with showing up.

I think, from the program, I think it’s worth talking about for a minute where the word “sincere” comes from, because it’s also very, very instructive. In the West, the word “sincere” goes back to the Renaissance, during that amazing time when there were so many geniuses, artistic geniuses everywhere. So in this glut of these amazing sculptures and painters in Italy, especially, in the 14- and 1500’s, there were an amazing amount of stone sellers. They were like hardware stores today. They were everywhere, And there were, like any vocation today, any retailers—there were honest, authentic sellers and there were fraudulent sellers. One way that fraudulent sellers would try to pass off damaged marble is they would get a piece of marble that had a crack in it and they would put wax in it and polish the wax and sell it as a pure piece of marble. Well the word *sine cera* in Latin means, “without wax.” So very quickly, an honest, authentic stone seller was one who didn’t hide the cracks or flaws in the stone.

And it wasn’t long after that the metaphor and the analogy came to be that an honest person, a sincere person didn’t, doesn’t, hide the flaws in their humanity, doesn’t hide the cracks in their character or their heart. Not only for the integrity of relationships but in many traditions, but we’ll just pick in the Tibetan mythology, it is said that a spiritual warrior—that is, not a military warrior—a spiritual warrior who is one who is committed to a life of transformation, a spiritual warrior always has a crack in their heart because that’s how the mysteries get in. So being sincere, not hiding the cracks in our humanity or the flaws in our character or the wounds that we carry is essential both for the integrity of relationships [and] because that is how everything larger than us can enter us and heal us and give us resilience.

So sincerity is definitely, I think being sincere is being more important—let’s put it this way; I was going to say more important than being intelligent. I think it’s a different kind of intelligence. I think sincerity is an emotional form of intelligence.

TS: Let’s say someone wants to become more sincere.

MN: Yes, I think this goes back to some of the things we talked about earlier. I think personally everybody has to find what that looks like in your life, but I would say that

archetypally, universally, we are always challenged by things that dishearten us, that understandably move us away from the heat of being alive.

So if we want to extract what is essential from life, through the gill of our heart, if we want to become more sincere, we need to recognize the ways in which we are disheartened and develop personal practices for how to move to what heartens us. To move from what puts us asleep—not to eliminate what puts us asleep, not to eliminate what numbs us, not to eliminate what distracts us—but how to move from what’s distracting to what’s essential, from what is sleep-giving to what is wakeful, from what is numb to what is alive.

This involves all the things that we’ve been talking about—how to lean into life when experience and pain and suffering and loss push us away. How do we do that? I think it takes—not only are we charged to do this by ourselves, but we need friends. We need honest friends. We don’t do this enough in our culture. It’s somehow taboo, but you know, just like what you asked me Tami, it’s like if I feel I’m at point in my life where I’m struggling to be authentic and sincere, well, I need to have the courage to go to trusted loved ones to say, “You know what, I’m struggling here. How do I do this? Can you help me do this? You know me—what am I not doing that I used to do? Or what am I doing that you see is not being consistent with what you love about me?” We don’t really process our heart in an honest way in our culture, when it’s of a tremendous, tremendous resource to do that.

TS: You know, Mark, I just wanted to end with talking a little bit about this idea of pilgrimage and our life as a pilgrimage. You mentioned at one point this journey of the pilgrim, and several people have sent me a quote from you about the difference between being a pilgrim and being a nomad. Maybe you remember this quote that I’m talking about.

MN: Yes. I think this is in *The Book of Awakening*. “To journey without being changed, is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and to be transformed by the journeying is to be a pilgrim.” Of course you know, we hear that and discover that, and I and everyone who reads that or hears that, we want to be the last one. We don’t want to be chameleon or the nomad, but the truth is, we’re all three, and we move among these things. This is part of our incarnation on earth.

We can spend a day as a nomad or a decade. We can spend a year as a chameleon or an hour, but the important thing as we’ve been talking through all of this is how do we return to what is authentic, how do we become more sincere? How do we extract what is essential? How do we return to being awake and being compassionate so that we can move through the lessons of being a nomad and a chameleon so that the underlying journey that holds us is one of being a pilgrim?

TS: I want to end on just a one final note here, you have this teaching and it’s part of your teaching related to staying awake to “be present in all ways and in all directions.” Can you give us a feeling for that? Be present in all ways and in all directions.

MN: Yes, and I think again like everything else, if we are blessed, we can have moments of this. I don’t think we can arrive at a state of being like that. This is the sense that we spend so much time sorting and counting—you know, sorting good feelings from difficult feelings, sorting what’s right from wrong, what’s good from bad, what’s up from down. But the essence, the aliveness, the mystery of life doesn’t present itself that way. Just like we talked about water. It’s H₂O. I can’t say, I’d only like the hydrogen, please. It stops

being water and it stops being quenching. So life comes as a whole and a oneness. And the only way to receive it that way is by being open enough and present enough to not delineate and parse and separate.

You know, the older I get, when I feel things deeply, it's usually more than one feeling at the same time. I can be happy and sad at the same time. I can be confused and clear. I can be tired and awake. I think that our charge is how to keep the heart open enough to get the lessons and the depth that those things hold at the same time and not to reflex because my mind is uncomfortable as a discomfort. "Well, wait a minute, how can I be tired and awake at the same time? No, no, I've got to put tired over here, and awake over there, and I'll try to move from being tired to awake." And we totally stop growing in our experience of oneness. It's kind of a very wonderful kind of ongoing example, but the saints and sages of any tradition, wherever you think they might be, they have for the moment returned to the state of oneness where love isn't reserved for a person or an object. Love emanates like the sun for everything. I think that when we're authentic enough and sincere enough, the reward for that is that we can no longer contain our love. It spills like the sun on everything.

TS: Beautiful. I've been talking with Mark Nepo. Mark, thank you so much...

MN: Oh, it's a joy.

TS: ...for your warm sun in the center of your heart, the poem that you are.