

## The Exquisite Risk: Daring to Live an Authentic Life by Mark Nepo

They say that spirits make music  
by moving through the breaks  
in what is living.

If so, the work of love  
is to hold each other and listen.

"When I was ill, it was easy to separate myself from others, as a patient surrounded by caregivers. While this, of course, was outwardly accurate, in the truer moments of crisis, we needed each other, and it was hard to tell who was ill and who was well, who was giving and who was getting. In the center of it, we were just tumbled in an authentic embrace that saved us all.

"During those days, I had a dream in which love was the fire and experience was the wood. And since, I've come to understand that it is the loving of experience that releases the warmth and light that waits in each of us. This is why experience is necessary, for living through it, the love we are born with becomes who we are.

"My own time on earth has led me to believe in two powerful instruments that turn experience into love: holding and listening. For every time I have held or been held, every time I have listened or been listened to, experience burns like wood in that eternal fire and I find myself in the presence of love. This has always been so. Consider these two old beliefs that carry the wisdom and challenge of holding and listening.

"The first is the age-old notion that when holding a shell to your ear, you can hear the ocean. It always seems to work. The scrutiny of medicine has revealed that when you hold that shell to your ear, you actually hear your own pulsations, the ocean of your blood being played back to you. Yet this fact does not diminish this mystery. It only enhances it. For holding a shell to our ear teaches us how to hear the Whole through the part, and how to find the Universe within us. It teaches us that when we dare to hold another being, like a shell, to our ear, we hear both the mystery of all life and the ocean of our own blood.

"Amazingly, each being has the story of the Universe encoded within them. Each soul is a shell shaped by the currents of the deep. Even physically, the inner ear — that delicate source of balance — is shaped like a conch. And so, whatever is held and listened to will show us where it lives in the world and in us.

"This brings us to the second belief: the folklore that if a horse breaks a leg, it must be put down. I've discovered that this isn't true. Oh it's true that it happens. Breeders shoot horses with broken legs as if there's nothing to be done. But now I know they do this for themselves, not wanting to care for a horse that cannot run.

"In just this way, fearful and selfish people cut the cord to those who are broken, not wanting to sit with a friend who can't find tomorrow, not wanting to be saddled with someone who will slow them down, not wanting to face what is broken in themselves. In this lies the challenge of compassion. For when we dare to hold those forced to the ground, dare to hold them close, the truth of holding and listening sings and we are carried into the wisdom of broken bones and how things heal.

"These are quiet braveries we all need. The courage to wait and watch with all of who we are. The courage to admit that we are not alone. The courage to hold each other to the ear of our heart. And the courage to care for things that are broken.

"The practice ground for these braveries is always the small things at hand. Somehow, through the practice of doing small things with great love, as Mother Teresa puts it, we learn how to be brave. In truth, the work of love is tending to small things completely. Such tending opens the mystery. By the large-heartedness of our smallest attention, we enter the ocean of love that carries us all.

"Simply and profoundly, the work of love is to love. For in that act, the Universe comes alive. Such aliveness is the space that opens between us, as Martin Buber says, when two bow and touch in a true way."