

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Inside the Miracle: An Interview with Mark Nepo

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today Mark speaks with Mark Nepo. Mark Nepo is a poet and philosopher who has taught in the fields of poetry and philosophy for over forty years. His many published works include “The Book of Awakening,” a number one New York Times Best Seller, and his newest “Inside the Miracle: Enduring Suffering, Approaching Wholeness.” Featured on Oprah Winfrey’s “Super Soul Sunday,” Nepo devotes his writing and teaching to the process of inner transformation and the life of relationship. Mark talked to him about gratitude, faith and the acceptance on the path of awakening.

MM: Hi, Mark. It’s great to talk to you. I want to discuss your new book “Inside the Miracle,” which is a meditation on awakening, healing and impermanence, with a quote that you use of Blake’s. You write ‘without contraries, there can be no progression.’ Is this something that cancer taught you in your own life?

MN: Wonderful to talk with you again, Mark. Yeah, well, I particularly used that—it was a moment in my cancer journey. And I should say that, as you probably know from the book, but the heat of that journey was actually twenty-eight years ago and it really just changed how I see the world and experience life. And I think when you go through something life changing, I don’t think we ever get over it, you keep moving with it and through it. And from one of the lessons early on for me... I was in the midst of... I had great fear. I was in my thirties, I had never been through anything physically challenging, so I was scared of everything, and there were lots of people around me going through similar things, and this ‘without contrary there is no progression’ really came from, (which is that Blake aphorism) really came from this sweet, gentle man named Tom who was going through his own cancer journey.

He was on one side of me, so to speak, and he acquiesced to whatever anybody in the medical community wanted to do. He just didn’t really have any opinion, he kind of vanished. And so, as Blake says about ‘without contrary there is no progression,’ he didn’t even participate in his own healing, and I watched him over the course of a year and a half just fade away and die. Now he may have died anyway but, you know, he was one lesson.

And on the other side of me, so to speak, was a very strong woman by the name of Janice, and Janice was quite the opposite. She was someone who didn’t believe in any medical intervention whatsoever. She relied only on her own will and her own constitution and I watched her on the other side of me hold firm and not welcome any help whatsoever, and she died a very drawn out and difficult death.

I raise this (I do it in the book), not to judge these people whatsoever but they became teachers for me because in my journey—and I think this extrapolates to ordinary time and ordinary decisions that you meet in life, it’s just accentuated so acutely when we’re going through a life threatening situation—but, you know, there’s never been a decision I didn’t go through where I didn’t feel Janice and Tom on my shoulders. Because I recognized their energy, they live in me.

And I can dig in and be stubborn at any moment, and I can just acquiesce at any moment so they were real teachers to me of how to find some kind of balance, when to trust what I know to be true in my heart regardless of what anyone says around me. And when to welcome the help and direction of others because I can’t possibly know enough [chuckles], so there is a paradox right

there. And you know, that Blake quote, that aphorism, I mean physically, all you have to do is imagine holding a watermelon seed between your fingers, and if you squeeze it, it squirts out, so there is a contrary which caused movement forward and it is similar emotionally and psychologically.

MM: It is such a fascinating paradox and duality. So what you're saying is that finding the middle path somehow between total acquiescence and shutting down is the way to apply the energy of the contrary and allow for progression and not just being stuck where we are?

MN: Yeah, I would say that, and I would also say that my experience is that it never works out that cleanly. There are times when I had to totally acquiesce and surrender, and there are times when I had to stand firm. And so I think what it really offers is the teaching, or the instruction, that we really have to follow our hearts. I went through so many different decisions, that if you look at them now they seem totally illogical. I had to initially say 'no' to brain surgery and spinal chemotherapy, and that got me through one journey with the tumor that was on my brain, and then within a year, when a sister tumor appeared on my rib and my back, well now I had to say 'yes' to thoracic surgery to remove that rib. And I had to say 'yes' to chemotherapy, and then the chemo, in months, because I had *very* aggressive chemo, started to damage me, and actually started to kill me, I had to say 'no' to the chemo.

So, 'yes, no, up, down,' but following my heart. And I would say that when we follow our heart to its bottom, the bottom of the heart opens to the world of spirit. Following my heart and therefore listening to spirit, which is both me and beyond me, I was led to the right decision for me at every turn, which on the surface seemed illogical and irrational but was the only particular path I could get to be here to talk to you today. And that leads to another Blake aphorism, which says 'straight is the road to improvement, but crooked is the road to genius.'

MM: Yes. So allowing your own crookedness and the crookedness of your own decisions, your own choices that are coming from your own particular heart is the way forward in those dark times.

MN: Yeah, and I think it is because whenever we are in conflict or pain or fear or worry, if we can open our hearts and hold nothing back and enter the moment at hand—because I think there is a lot of talk about being in the moment in our age, which is wonderful, but we also kind of make a cartoon of it—it's not just to be irresponsible and carefree and not worry about anything and just go 'yippee.' I have found that when I can open my heart and hold nothing back with the moment at hand, I *participate* and *feel*, not just grasp, I feel the oneness of things. And when I can feel the unity of life, it gives me fresh eyes, it gives me open ears, it allows me to see differently, and therefore I make different decisions. And that's one of the great gifts of being in the moment, is it will lead up to what's in the next moment authentically.

MM: You mention spirit and it reminds me of another quote I love from the book. You write that, for you, at a certain point in the heat of your own struggle, 'faith is no longer a construct but some vital tool as urgent as an oar in the ocean, or a prayer in the modern world.' That is so beautiful. What is the nature of your faith, Mark, and how do you talk about it to people who don't have faith?

MN: Yeah, thank you. So faith to me is not unquestioned belief in a principle or an idea or a tradition or a ritual. Faith is a felt certainty in life itself, even though as a fragile part in life, I may not survive. So the sun doesn't stop shining because people are blind. And, you know, when I was—and I mention this in the book early on, it was a very difficult but revelatory moment for me in my life—was when I was suffering from a very difficult botched first chemo treatment, I'd been sick and it was two weeks after a rib was removed in my back and I was throwing up from chemo every twenty minutes, with nothing but oral medicine, that was one of the ways it was botched, and I couldn't keep it down. And I was in a Holiday Inn room, and every time I got sick I thought 'that can't happen again' but eventually I did go to the emergency room.

But my former wife was there and one of my oldest friends was with me, and the three of us were in this Holiday Inn outside New York City, and at five in the morning, I'm sitting on the floor with my hands on my knees, exhausted, and my former wife in her pain and her desperation and anger just kinda blurts out 'Where is God?'

I don't know where it come from in me but I whispered, 'Here. Right here.' And I think I spent the last twenty-eight years with all my writing and teaching inquiring into what came to me in the moment, and I think one of the first lessons is about faith because I saw very clearly in that moment, though I didn't understand it, that to be broken is no reason to see all things as broken, but because I was sitting on that floor in pain, exhausted, broken, afraid... Well, the sun was coming up, and somewhere else in that Holiday Inn, other two people were making love and, well, further miles away, somebody was being born.

And it didn't minimize, you know, we tend to play see-saw with the difficult unity of life. Either everything, as in the whole world is broken because I'm broken, and it's a terrible world because I'm in pain and I'm afraid... that's where it's a fearful world. Or we go the other way and we say, well, because the miracle is still happening, then what is happening to me is insignificant. And I think we're asked to hold in our faith the idea that, 'No – both are true.' Not minimizing what I was going through but, I at once needed the company of those who understood what pain and fear were, but I needed the resilience of everything that was not broken to heal me, because I was broken.

So, faith I think is a felt understanding of not giving up on the certainty of the currents of life and not extrapolating or projecting what we're going through, and then paint the whole world that way. I mean, a great image for this, which is actually in one of my other books, which I learned from watching a little baby duck in a lake. I was up on Lake George teaching at a place, and I was watching this sitting on the shore, and this little baby duck was curled up into itself asleep, and I thought, you know, I've never seen such an amazing example of trust. It's bobbing on the water.

And then it made me think about how we are taught to swim, and our first experiences of swimming, and you know how when we're first put in the water we start to sink, even if we're in salt water we start to sink or just start to descend a little bit in the water. And the more we fight it the worse it is. But if we relax and just let ourselves sink a little, then the buoyancy of whether its salt or fresh water, holds us up. And the analogy is the same with the waters of existence.

Whatever we're going through, is not to minimize the truth of the pain or the fear or the unknown, or whatever it is we're going through, but if we can relax and let ourselves settle, then in a few inches, the buoyancy, the mystical buoyancy of existence will hold us up. It's not going to remove what we have to go through. And I think the metaphor is that those two inches are maybe the most difficult two inches to travel on the earth.

MM: Hm. Mmm.

MN: And no one knows how to do it but, back to me is faith, that trust in those two inches, that everything that holds me is not broken because I'm broken.

And one last thing about faith. I love the protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, his definition of faith. He said that faith is an act of ultimate concern. I love that.

MM: Beautiful.

MN: I love that. It's an act of ultimate concern, which gets back to holding nothing back and by opening our heart we enter or return to our conversation with the universe.

MM: It reminds me of Tagore, also, that faith is like the bird that feels the sun while the dawn is still dark.

MN: Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah.

MM: But you can feel it.

I'd like to talk to you about mystery and the connection between mystery and faith. In the book you write, "The sighted fin only implies the wonder of the great fish pumping below and the sighted star only implies the ocean of light flooding the universe beyond the range of our eyes." That is so beautiful.

MN: Oh, thank you.

MM: Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between mystery and gratitude, faith and gratitude?

MN: Yeah. Just before we talk about that, let me just talk for context about how I understand the nature of existence. So, and obvious from those metaphors, I feel very deeply, and I can't tell you why, I've just always felt this way [chuckles], but from the time I was a child, that the physical universe is the tip of the iceberg. It is the manifestation of the unseen world, and that the unseen world, it is where everything is tied together and where the forces of life happen. So in that regard, we have been taught by and large in the West to think of destiny as a projection of where I might be in the future, or where I think or believe I'm supposed to be in the future. I actually think of destiny as the manifestation of the unseen in the same way that trees and plants grow out of the ground. I think who we are, and where we go, and what we do manifests out of the unseen, out of the invisible, and that that is our destiny, to be fully here.

So with that kind of offering there, I think mystery is the unnameable and unseen unity of things, which we could call God, we have a hundred names for it, right? God, Tao, Atman, dharma,

quantum physic. I think it's really actually kind of funny that even atheists believe in things larger than themselves, they just call it 'nothing' instead of 'everything.'

MM: [Laughs] Right.

MN: What's the difference, you know? [Chuckles] So, I'm more interested in how we relate to everything larger than us, then what we call it, and whether we try to give primacy to our name for it. So mystery is that terrain of the unseen. It's almost the spiritual physics of the unseen and therefore faith allows us to have inquiry into the unseen dynamics of things, because everything that matters is really intangible.

MM: Uh hum.

MN: Love, you know, anger, disappointment. You could name a hundred things but the things that matter are not seeable. We see the manifestation of them, so, you know, you can't see a wind except for the trees that it blows through, and you can't see spirit except for the hearts that stand up and that it blows through. So gratitude, when *we* are grateful, we are accepting the mystery that's larger than our surface understanding and that gratitude opens a door to the mystery. So I don't think we can really understand or begin to glimpse or see some of those spiritual physics if we don't have gratitude, because gratitude is what kind of opens the door and lets the light come through.

MM: And isn't part of gratitude learning to be thankful for who we are? There's another great quote that I love, you write, 'When we cease to shed what's dead in us in order to soothe the fears of others, we remain partial.' So that says to me that unless we are true to who we are, grateful for who we are at a certain level, we can't be whole.

MN: Absolutely. Absolutely. And this is one of the challenges of being human because we live in the midst of another paradox, an essential paradox between solitude and community. The one side of the paradox is the fact that what we know directly about mystery and life, we learn firsthand mostly in solitude, and the paradox is that we share that. We all share that. We have that experience somewhere along the way in solitude, and so enlivened by that or confused by that or troubled by that, we want company. We want to share that, we want to explore that. I want to say, 'Did you experience that?' 'Did you not?' 'Is this crazy?' 'Isn't this beautiful?'

Because on the one hand, we have to trust our firsthand experience and on the other hand, if all I trust is what I know, boy, [chuckles] I know very little. So I need to learn from others, without giving up who I am. So that puts us in the realm of community, and the shadow of community is, in order to belong we give ourselves away. And the shadow of solitude is that we start to believe only what we think.

So what we're talking about here leads to just touch on one of the great metaphors of all time, and that's Plato's metaphor of the cave, the allegory of the cave, which, we know it so well, or we've heard it, or we've forgotten it, that we take it for granted. But it's a profound kind of situational metaphor that talks about this. So, briefly to kind of sum it up, nobody knows how everybody lives in this cave, out of the light, but they do and it's a tradition. And they're all fastened to a rock underground, and there are shadows on the wall from a fire that they don't see.

And the lead person, or their priest, or whoever is the high leader of the group, is interpreting the shadows on the wall. And what happens is that one of these people who is listening, his chains crumble. He wasn't so much trying to get free—he didn't even know what freedom was—but they wore down; they crumbled and he oddly was freed, and he wandered out to the mouth of the cave where the fire was that was casting these shadows.

And now to get out into what was his direct experience of life, he had to run through the flames. So he runs through the flames and he gets a little burned but he's not hurt, and now he is stunned by the miracle of life. There are things, there are little creatures that fly in the sky, and seeing this clear liquid that's flowing, where he can see himself and he can wash himself, and there's light, and there's grass, and he's just blown away.

And then he goes through kind of a crisis of 'Well, am I dreaming or was where I was false? Or what's going on here?' And he's so excited about life that he's discovered, and *now* he remembers all those that he left behind. And he has love for them, and he says, 'Oh, if I could just tell them what I've found, oh my god.' So he runs back to the mouth of the cave, and now he's on the other side of the fire, and now this is profound because in order, this raises 'What do we know and how do we share what we know?' So he had to go through one fire of falseness to really experience life directly but now in order to share it, he had to go through the fire again, and he would have to go back through it a third time to bring them out into it.

So he goes back through the fire because he loves these people and he comes back and he said, 'Hey, you are not going to believe what I've found! Come! This is unbelievable!' And of course they say, 'You're interrupting the high priest, you're being disrespectful. Sit down and shut up.'

He says, 'No, no, you don't understand. Come, this is amazing!'

And the priest doesn't do anything to dissuade them but they are so frightened of him that sadly, they stone him to death. So of course, there's another version to this story, which is that we say, 'Oh my god, you saw something I didn't see.' This is another act of faith. 'Show me! Show me! Yeah, take me out there. Let me see it. Thank you!' And don't we all, even today, we face this, this is just not political fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism. There is personal fundamentalism, where we're ready to stone someone who sees something you can't see. Anyway, I kind of got off into that but it does kind of relate.

MM: It relates deeply. It actually reminds me of the bodhisattva path, you know, coming back through the fire to draw people toward awareness and then being punished for it.

MN: Yeah. Right? And the beauty of the bodhisattva to me is that whole archetype, at least this is how I take, ok, I don't know if strict Buddhists would interpret it this way [chuckles] but I hold that which I love, you know, the bodhisattva is free to kind of leave the realm of suffering, right, but decides to stay to keep others company as they approach that liberation and say, 'Well I'm not gonna go until everybody can come.' But in essence, and this is kind of my filling in, my assumptions, but I believe the bodhisattva knows not everybody's gonna make it. So basically the bodhisattva is accepting heaven here on earth and is accepting to keep people company and to be if you will, minimize suffering, without leaving the world to suffering.

MM: Exactly. That's really beautifully said. You're kind of a bodhisattva, Mark.

MN: Oh, well thank you.

MM: You are. And I thank you for taking the time. It's so good to talk to you again, and congratulations on the new book.

MN: Thank you, thanks so much. It's great to talk to you Mark.