

New York Times Bestseller

MARK NEPO



THE BOOK OF
AWAKENING

Having the Life You Want
by Being Present to the Life You Have

with subject index

PRAISE FOR

The Book of Awakening

“Mark Nepo is an astonishing poet and teacher. He generously comforts us while guiding us toward the deep, quiet river of wisdom that saturates each and every day of our lives.”

—WAYNE MULLER, founder and president of Bread for the Journey and author of *How, Then, Shall We Live?* and *Sabbath*

“A true treasure chest of practices, reflections, and poetry to remember the splendor, beauty, and magnitude of the human spirit.”

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“Mark Nepo's work is as gentle and reliable as the tides, and he is as courageous as anyone I've known in looking deeply into the mysteries of the self.”

—MICHAEL J. MAHONEY, professor of clinical psychology at the University of North Texas and Distinguished Adjunct Faculty at the Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center; author of *Human Change Processes* and *Constructive Psychotherapy*

“Mark Nepo is one of the finest spiritual guides of our time, and *The Book of Awakening* is one of the finest fruits of his spirit. His poetic gift shows through on every page, and his own courageous journey from near-death to new life breathes truth into every word he writes. This book is a gift of love. Open the gift—and open yourself to it—and you, like I, will be filled with gratitude and grace with renewal.”

—PARKER J. PALMER, author of *Let Your Life Speak* and *The Courage to Teach*

Non-Fiction

As Far As the Heart Can See

Finding Inner Courage

Unlearning Back to God

The Exquisite Risk

Poetry

Surviving Has Made Me Crazy

Suite for the Living

Inhabiting Wonder

Acre of Light

Fire Without Witness

God, the Maker of the Bed, and the Painter

Editor

Deepening the American Dream

Recordings

Staying Awake

Holding Nothing Back

As Far As the Heart Can See

The Book of Awakening

Finding Inner Courage

Finding Our Way in the World

Inside the Miracle

THE BOOK OF AWAKENING

*Having the Life You Want by
Being Present to the Life You Have*

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Conari Press

This edition first published in 2011 by Conari Press,
an imprint of Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC

With offices at:
665 Third Street, Suite 400
San Francisco, CA 94107
www.redwheelweiser.com

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ISBN: 978-1-57324-117-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available upon request

Cover design: Jim Warner
Cover photography: Image Bank, Paul Trummer, Water Lily, Austria

Printed in the United States of America

MAL

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Wisdom is a living stream, not an icon
preserved in a museum. Only when we find the
spring of wisdom in our own life can it
flow to future generations.*

— THICH NHAT HANH

Like most gifts, it is the passing of something meaningful between people that awakens us to our potential. Coming upon the possibility of writing this book fourteen years ago was such a gift for me. Freshly on the other side of cancer, I was gentle and raw and eager to bottle light for those suffering in darkness the way I had been. It took two years to discover these small passages and shape them into this book. Ever since, it's been my teacher as it has made its way from reader to reader for more than a decade.

While writing a few entries at a time, I was asked by an old friend if I could share them through email. That slowly led to a weekly sharing that went quietly for years all over the world, from London to India to South Africa. In 2000, the book began its journey in print. Almost two years ago, the book was kindly given to Oprah Winfrey as a birthday present, another appearance of gifting, and her deep connection and kind support has jettisoned the book into twenty languages and over two dozen printings.

One of the foreign editions is in Russian, and I can't help but think of my grandmother who came to America from a small town outside of Kiev almost a century ago, who learned English slowly in Brooklyn thirty-seven years before I was born, who held my hands as a boy and said to me in broken English, "These are the oldest things you own." Across oceans and centuries, the mysterious cycle of giving and receiving is very humbling.

I am often told that different passages of this book speak as if I knew exactly what a reader was going through. I confess I am not that smart. But such a convergence is a testament to the luminous fact that the soul drinks from the same lake at center. And somehow when one of us bows our head toward that lake, the center is opened for us all. This is one of the quietest gifts.

So more than the pages that follow, it is the living center that each page points to that I continue to be amazed by. This is the timeless gift I hope you receive, the one that will free you and shape you as it passes through.

—Mark

September 2011

This book is meant to be of use, to be a companion, a soul friend. It is a book of awakenings. To write this I've had to live it. It's given me a chance to gather and share the quiet teachers I've met throughout my life. The journey of unearthing and shaping these entries has helped me bring my inner and outer life more closely together. It has helped me know and use my heart. It has made me more whole. I hope it can be such a tool for you.

Gathering the insights for this book has been like finding bits of stone that glistened on the path. I paused to reflect on them, to learn from them, then tucked them away and continued. After two years I'm astonished to dump my bag of broken stones to see what I've found. The bits that have glistened along the way are what make up this book.

Essentially, they all speak about spirit and friendship, about our ongoing need to stay vital and in love with this life, no matter the hardships we encounter. From many traditions, from many experiences, from many beautiful and honest voices, the songs herein all sing of pain and wonder and the mystery of love.

I was drawn to this form because as a poet, I was longing for a manner of expression that could be as useful as a spoon, and as a cancer survivor, daybooks have become inner food. In truth, over the last twenty-five years, the daybook has been answering a collective need and has become a spiritual sonnet of our age, a sturdy container for small doses of what matters.

All I can ask of this work is that it comes over you the way the ocean covers a stone stuck in the sand, open, that it surprises and refreshes, that it makes you or me glisten, and leaves us scoured as we are, just softer for the moment and more clear.

It is my profound hope that something in these pages will surprise and refresh you, will make you glisten, will help you live, love, and find your way to joy.

—Mark

One of the sweetest joys in my life is to hear Mark Nepo read his poetry. There is a tangible air of adventure. I am always surprised as Mark, unwrapping hidden treasure, carefully opening a simple moment, reveals the most extraordinary miracles. When he reads in public, you hear people catch their breath as they recognize something deep and true, something known but forgotten, missed. Mark sees it, remembers it for us, and gives it back to us. In the end, there is a sense of gratitude for being awakened again to something truly precious.

Our life is made of days. It is only in the days of our lives that we find peace, joy, and healing. There are a thousand tiny miracles that punctuate our days, and Mark Nepo is a student of the miraculous. An alchemist of the ordinary, he invites us to see, taste, touch, dance, and feel our way into the heart of life.

Just as a life is made of days, so are days made of moments. A life well lived is firmly planted in the sweet soil of moments. Mark Nepo is a gardener in this soil; he plants seeds of grace that grow only in the soil of loving attention and mindful time. We receive the deepest blessings of life when we fall in love with such moments—and Mark shows us how to fall in love deeply and with abandon.

Mark had cancer, and it shook him awake. His descent into illness gave birth to an astonishing mindfulness. Now, he invites us to use his eyes and heart to see and feel how awake our being alive can be. Having survived his cancer, Mark brings with him the eyes of a dying person who is grateful simply to breathe. But more than gratefulness he brings wisdom, clarity, kindness, and a passionate enthusiasm for sucking the marrow out of moments, out of the bones of time.

If you ache to live this way, Mark is your guide.

When Mark finished the final round of chemotherapy that helped cure his cancer, he rose early on the day, squeezed fresh orange juice, and placed the glass of juice on the table before him. Then he waited, reflecting on the promise of the day, until the sun rose over the trees outside his window. At that moment, he told me, the light from the sun pierced the juice and “diffused into orange, crystalline light,” at which point Mark lifted the juice to his lips.

Most sacraments are acts of breathtaking simplicity: a simple prayer, a sip of wine and a piece of bread, a single breath in meditation, a sprinkling of water on the forehead, an exchange of rings, a kind word, a blessing. Any of these, performed in a moment of mindfulness, may open the doors of our spiritual perception and bring nourishment and delight.

This is a book of sacraments; it is Mark's generous gift to us, a banquet of miracles made from the stuff of days, the ordinary riches of a human life. Take your time, savor each page. Above all, be willing to be surprised. Life may already be more miraculous than you ever imagined.



JANUARY 1

Precious Human Birth

Of all the things that exist,
we breathe and wake and turn it into song.

There is a Buddhist precept that asks us to be mindful of how rare it is to find ourselves in human form on Earth. It is really a beautiful view of life that offers us the chance to feel enormous appreciation for the fact that we are here as individual spirits filled with consciousness, drinking water and chopping wood.

It asks us to look about at the ant and antelope, at the worm and the butterfly, at the dog and the castrated bull, at the hawk and the wild lonely tiger, at the hundred-year-old oak and the thousand-year-old patch of ocean. It asks us to understand that no other life form has the consciousness of being that we are privilege to. It asks us to recognize that of all the endless species of plants and animals and minerals that make up the Earth, a very small portion of life has the wakefulness of spirit that we call “being human.”

That I can rise from some depth of awareness to express this to you and that you can receive me at this instant is part of our precious human birth. You could have been an ant. I could have been an anteater. You could have been rain. I could have been a lick of salt. But we were blessed—in this time and in this place—to be human beings, alive in rare ways we often take for granted.

All of this to say, this precious human birth is unrepeatable. So what will you do today, knowing that you are one of the rarest forms of life to ever walk the Earth? How will you carry yourself? What will you do with your hands? What will you ask and of whom?

Tomorrow you could die and become an ant, and someone will be setting traps for you. But today you are precious and rare and awake. It ushers us into grateful living. It makes hesitation useless. Grateful and awake, ask what you need to know now. Say what you feel now. Love what you love now.

- *Sit outside, if possible, or near a window, and note the other life forms around you.*
- *Breathe slowly and think of the ant and the blade of grass and the blue jay and what these life forms can do that you can't.*
- *Think of the pebble and the piece of bark and the stone bench, and center your breathing on the interior things that you can do that they can't.*
- *Rise slowly, feeling beautifully human, and enter your day with the conscious intent of doing one thing that only humans can do.*
- *When the time arises, do this one thing with great reverence and gratitude.*

All Fall Down

Lead us from the unreal to the real.

— HINDU INVOCATION

It was a snowy night, and Robert was recalling the time two springs ago when he was determined to paint the family room. Up early, he was out the door, to the hardware store gathering the gallons of red, the wooden mixing sticks, the drop cloths, and the one-time brushes that always harden, no matter what you soak them in.

He mixed the paint outside and waddled to the door with a gallon in each hand, the drop cloth under his arm, and a wide brush in his mouth. He began to chuckle in telling what happened, teetered there for minutes, trying to open the door, not wanting to put anything down. I was so stubborn. I had the door almost open when I lost my grip, stumbled backward, and wound up on the ground, red gallons all over me.”

At this point, he laughed at himself, as he has done many times, and we watched the snow fall in silence. I thought of his little story the whole way home. Amazingly, we all do this, whether with groceries or paint or with the stories we feel determined to share. We do this with our love, with our sense of truth, even with our pain. It's such a simple thing, but in a moment of ego we refuse to put down what we carry in order to open the door. Time and time again, we are offered the chance to truly learn this: We cannot hold on to things and enter. We must put down what we carry, open the door, and then take up only what we need to bring inside.

It is a basic human sequence: gather, prepare, put down, enter. But failing as we do, we always have that second chance: to learn how to fall, get up, and laugh.

- *Meditate on some threshold you are having trouble crossing in your life. It might be at work, at home, in a relationship, or the doorway to greater peace.*
- *Breathe steadily and look to yourself to see if you are carrying too much to open the door.*
- *Breathe slowly and with each out-breath put the things you are carrying down.*
- *Breathe freely now and open the door.*

Unlearning Back to God

The coming to consciousness is not a discovery of some new thing; it is a long and painful return to that which has always been.

— HELEN LUKE

Each person is born with an unencumbered spot—free of expectation and regret, free of ambition and embarrassment, free of fear and worry—an umbilical spot of grace where we were each first touched by God. It is this spot of grace that issues peace. Psychologists call this spot the Psychoid, theologians call it the Soul, Jung calls it the Seat of the Unconscious, Hindu masters call it Atma, Buddhists call it Dharma, Rilke calls it Inwardness, Sufis call it Qalb, and Jesus calls it the Center of our Love.

To know this spot of Inwardness is to know who we are, not by surface markers of identity, not by where we work or what we wear or how we like to be addressed, but by feeling our place in relation to the Infinite and by inhabiting it. This is a hard lifelong task, for the nature of becoming is a constant filming over of where we begin, while the nature of being is a constant erosion of what is non-essential. Each of us lives in the midst of this ongoing tension, growing tarnished or covered over only to be worn back to that incorruptible spot of grace at our core.

When the film is worn through, we have moments of enlightenment, moments of wholeness, moments of *satori*, as the Zen sages term it, moments of clear living when inner meets outer, moments of full integrity of being, moments of complete Oneness. And whether the film is a veil of culture, of memory, of mental or religious training, of trauma or sophistication, the removal of the film and the restoration of that timeless spot of grace is the goal of all therapy and education.

Regardless of subject matter, this is the only thing worth teaching: how to uncover that original center and how to live there once it is restored. We call the filming over a deadening of heart, and the process of return, whether brought about through suffering or love, is how we unlearn our way back to God.

- *Close your eyes and breathe your way beneath your troubles, the way a diver slips to that depth of stillness that is always waiting beneath the churning of the waves.*
- *Now, consider two things you love doing, such as running, drawing, singing, bird-watching, gardening, or reading. Meditate on what it is in each of these that makes you feel alive.*
- *Hold what they have in common before you, and breathing slowly, feel the spot of grace these dear things mirror within you.*

Between Peace and Joy

We could never have guessed We were already blessed where we are....

— JAMES TAYLOR

This reminds me of a woman who found a folded sponge all dried and compressed, and tucked inside the hardened fold was a message she'd been seeking. She carried the hardened sponge to the sea and, up to her waist in the deep, she watched it unfold and come to life in the water. Magically, the secret of life became visible in the bubbles being released from the sponge, and to her amazement a small fish, trapped in sleep in the hardened sponge, came alive and swam out to sea. From that day on, no matter where she went, she felt the little fish swimming in the deep, and this—the swimming of the little fish that had for so long been asleep—gave her a satisfaction that was somewhere between peace and joy.

Whatever our path, whatever the color or grain of our days, whatever riddles we must solve to stay alive, the secret of life somehow always has to do with the awakening and freeing of what has been asleep. Like that sponge, our very heart begs to unfold in the waters of our experience, and like the little fish, the soul is a tiny thing that brings us peace and joy when we let it swim.

But everything remains hard and compressed and illegible until, like this woman, waist deep in the ocean, we take our sleeping heart in our hands and plunge it tenderly into the life we are living.

- *With your eyes closed, meditate on the image of a hardened sponge unfolding like a flower underwater.*
- *As you breathe, practice seeing your heart as such a sponge.*
- *The next time you do the dishes, pause, hold the hardened sponge in the water, and feel your heart unfold.*

JANUARY 5

Show Your Hair

My grandmother told me, “Never hide your green hair—They can see it anyway.”

— ANGELES ARRIEN

From the agonies of kindergarten, when we first were teased or made fun of in the midst of all our innocence, we have all struggled in one way or another with hiding what is obvious about us.

No one plans this. It is not a conspiracy, but rather an inevitable and hurtful passage from knowing only ourselves to knowing the world. The tragedy is that many of us never talk about it, or never get told that our “green hair” is beautiful, or that we don't need to hide, no matter what anyone says on the way to lunch. And so, we often conclude that to know the world we must hide ourselves.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is an ancient, unspoken fact of being that blackmail is only possible if we believe that we have something to hide. The inner corollary of this is that worthless feelings arise when we believe, however briefly, that who we are is not enough.

- *Sit quietly, with your eyes closed, and with each in-breath feel the fact that who you are is enough.*

The Spoked Wheel

What we reach for may be different, but what makes us reach is the same.

Imagine that each of us is a spoke in an Infinite Wheel, and, though each spoke is essential to keeping the Wheel whole, no two spokes are the same. The rim of that Wheel is our living sense of community, family, and relationship, but the common hub where all the spokes join is the one center where all souls meet. So, as I move out into the world, I live out my uniqueness, but when I dare to look into my core, I come upon the one common center where all lives begin. In that center, we are all one and the same. In this way, we live out the paradox of being both unique and the same. For me, mysteriously and powerfully, when I look deep enough into you, I find me, and when you dare to hear my fear in the recess of your heart, you recognize it as your secret that you thought no one else knew. And that unexpected wholeness that is more than each of us, but common to all—that moment of union—is the atom of God.

Not surprisingly, like most people, in the first half of my life, I worked very hard to understand and strengthen my uniqueness. I worked hard to secure my place at the rim of the Wheel and to define and value myself by how different I was from everyone else. But in the second half of my life, I have been humbly brought to the center of that Wheel, and now I marvel at the mysterious oneness of our spirit.

Through cancer and grief and disappointment and unexpected turns in career—through the very breakdown and rearrangement of the things I have loved—I have come to realize that, as water smooths stone and enters sand, we become each other. How could I be so slow? What I've always thought set me apart binds me to others.

Never was this more clear to me than when I was sitting in a waiting room at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, staring straight into this Hispanic woman's eyes, she into mine. In that moment, I began to accept that we all see the same wonder, all feel the same agony, though we all speak in a different voice. I know now that each being born, inconceivable as it seems, is another Adam or Eve.

- *Sit with a trusted loved one and take turns:*
- *Name one defining trait of who you are that distinguishes you from others.*
- *Name one defining trait of who you are that you have in common with others.*
- *Discuss how you cope with the loneliness of what makes you unique from others, and how you cope with the experience of what makes you the same as others.*

We Must Take Turns

We must take turns: diving into all there is and counting the time.

The gift and responsibility of relationship is to take turns doing the dishes and putting up the storm windows, giving the other the chance to dive for God without worrying about dinner. While one explores the inner, the other must tend the outer.

A great model of this is how pearl divers search the deep in pairs. Without scuba tanks or regulators, one waits at the surface tending the lines tied to the other who soft-steps the sand for treasures he hopes he'll recognize.

He walks the bottom, watching the leaves of vegetation sway and sways himself till she tugs the cord. He swallows the little air left as he ascends. Aboard, they talk for hours, placing what was seen, rubbing the rough and natural pearl. In the morning, she dives and fills their baskets and he counts the time, hands wrapped about her line.

Quite plainly, these pearl divers show us the work of being together and the miracle of trust. We must take turns: whoever is on the surface must count the air time left, so the one below can dive freely.

- *Sit quietly and meditate on a significant relationship you are in with a friend or lover or family member.*
- *Breathe steadily and ask yourself if you take turns diving and counting the time.*
- *When moved to do so, discuss this with your loved one.*

Feeding Your Heart

No matter how dark, the hand always knows the way to the mouth.

— IDOMA PROVERB (NIGERIA)

Even when we can't see, we know how to feed ourselves. Even when the way isn't clear, the heart still pumps. Even when afraid, the air of everything enters and leaves the lungs. Even when clouds grow thick, the sun still pours its light earthward.

This African proverb reminds us that things are never quite as bad as they seem inside the problem. We have inner reflexes that keep us alive, deep impulses of being and aliveness that work beneath the hardships we are struggling with.

We must remember: the hand cannot eliminate the darkness, only find its way to the mouth. Likewise, our belief in life cannot eliminate our suffering, only find its way to feed our heart.

- *Sit quietly and, with your eyes closed, bring your open hands to your mouth.*
- *Inhale as you do this and notice how, without guidance, your hands know the way.*
- *Breathe slowly, and with your eyes closed, bring your open hands to your heart.*
- *Notice how, without your guidance, your heart knows the way.*

Life in the Tank

Love, and do what thou wilt.

— SAINT AUGUSTINE

It was a curious thing. Robert had filled the bathtub and put the fish in the tub, so he could clean their tank. After he'd scrubbed the film from the small walls of their make-believe deep, he went to retrieve them.

He was astonished to find that, though they had the entire tub to swim in, they were huddled in a small area the size of their tank. There was nothing containing them, nothing holding them back. Why wouldn't they dart about freely? What had life in the tank done to their natural ability to swim?

This quiet yet stark moment stayed with us both for a long time. We couldn't help but see those little fish going nowhere but into themselves. We now had a life-in-the-tank lens on the world and wondered daily, In what ways are we like them? In what ways do we go nowhere but into ourselves? In what ways do we shrink our world so as not to feel the press of our own self-imposed captivity?

Life in the tank made me think of how we are raised at home and in school. It made me think of being told that certain jobs are not acceptable and that certain jobs are out of reach, of being schooled to live a certain way, of being trained to think that only practical things are possible, of being warned over and over that life outside the tank of our values is risky and dangerous.

I began to see just how much we were taught as children to fear life outside the tank. As a father, Robert began to question if he was preparing his children for life in the tank or life in the uncontainable world.

It makes me wonder now, in middle age, if being spontaneous and kind and curious are all parts of our natural ability to swim. Each time I hesitate to do the unplanned or unexpected, or hesitate to reach and help another, or hesitate to inquire into something I know nothing about; each time I ignore the impulse to run in the rain or to call you up just to say I love you—I wonder, am I turning myself, swimming safely in the middle of the tub?

- *Sit quietly until you feel thoroughly in your center.*
- *Now rise and slowly walk about the room you are in.*
- *Now walk close to the walls of your room and meditate on life in your tank.*
- *Breathe clearly and move to the doorway and meditate on the nature of what is truly possible in life.*
- *Now step through the doorway and enter your day. Step through your day and enter the world.*

Akiba

When Akiba was on his deathbed, he bemoaned
to his rabbi that he felt he was
a failure. His rabbi moved closer and asked
why, and Akiba confessed that he had not
lived a life like Moses. The poor man began
to cry, admitting that he feared God's judgment.
At this, his rabbi leaned into his ear and
whispered gently, "God will not judge Akiba
for not being Moses. God will judge Akiba for
not being Akiba."

— FROM THE TALMUD

We are born with only one obligation—to be completely who we are. Yet how much of our time is spent comparing ourselves to others, dead and alive? This is encouraged as necessary in the pursuit of excellence. Yet a flower in its excellence does not yearn to be a fish, and a fish in its unmanaged elegance does not long to be a tiger. But we humans find ourselves always falling into the dream of another life. Or we secretly aspire to the fortune or fame of people we don't really know. When feeling badly about ourselves, we often try on other skins rather than understand and care for our own.

Yet when we compare ourselves to others, we see neither ourselves nor those we look up to. We only experience the tension of comparing, as if there is only one ounce of being to feed all our hungers. But the Universe reveals its abundance most clearly when we can be who we are. Mysteriously, every weed and ant and wounded rabbit, every living creature has its unique anatomy of being which, when given over to, is more than enough.

Being human, though, we are often troubled and blocked by insecurity, that windedness of heart that makes us feel unworthy. And when winded and troubled, we sometimes feel compelled to push ourselves up. For in our pain, it seems to make sense that if we were larger, we would be further from our pain. If we were larger, we would be harder to miss. If we were larger, we'd have a better chance of being loved. Then, not surprisingly, others need to be made smaller so we can maintain our illusion of seeming bigger than our pain.

Of course, history is the humbling story of our misbegotten inflations, and truth is the corrective story of how we return to exactly who we are. And compassion, sweet compassion, is the never-ending story of how we embrace each other and forgive ourselves for not accepting our beautifully particular place in the fabric of all there is.

- *Fill a wide bowl with water. Then clear your mind in meditation and look closely at your reflection.*

- *While looking at your reflection, allow yourself to feel the tension of one comparison you carry. Feel the pain of measuring yourself against another.*
- *Close your eyes and let this feeling through.*
- *Now, once again, look closely at your reflection in the bowl, and try to see yourself in comparison to no one.*
- *Look at your reflection and allow yourself to feel what makes you unique. Let this move through.*

Ted Shawn

To know God without being God-like is like trying to swim without entering water.

— OREST BEDRIJ

Underneath all we are taught, there is a voice that calls to us beyond what is reasonable, and listening to that flicker of spirit, we often find deep healing. This is the voice of embodiment calling us to live our lives like sheet music played, and it often speaks to us briefly in moments of deep crisis. Sometimes it is so faint we mistake its whisper for wind through leaves. But taking it into the heart of our pain, it can often open the paralysis of our lives.

This brings to mind the story of a young divinity student who was stricken with polio, and from somewhere deep within him came an unlikely voice calling him to, of all things, dance. So, with great difficulty, he quit divinity school and began to dance, and slowly and miraculously, he not only regained the use of his legs, but went on to become one of the fathers of modern dance.

This is the story of Ted Shawn, and it is compelling for us to realize that studying God did not help him. Embodying God did. The fact of Ted Shawn's miracle shows us that Dance, in all its forms, is where Theology lived. This leads us all to the inescapable act of living out what is kept in, of daring to breathe in muscle and bone what we know and feel and believe—again and again.

Whatever crisis we face, there is this voice of embodiment that speaks beneath our pain ever so quickly, and if we can hear it and believe it, it will show us a way to be reborn. The courage to hear and embody opens us to a startling secret, that the best chance to be whole is to love whatever gets in the way, until it ceases to be an obstacle.

- *Before work or during the day, sit quietly outside for a few moments.*
- *Close your eyes and be still. Feel the air on your closed lids.*
- *Let your love wash through your heart up your chest.*
- *Let your love breeze up your throat and behind your eyes.*
- *When you open your eyes, stretch and focus on the first thing you see.*
- *If it is a bench, say I believe in bench. If a tree, say I believe in tree. If a torn flower, say I believe in torn flower.*
- *Rise with a simple belief in what you feel and see, and touch what is before you, giving your love a way out.*

Seeing into Darkness

Seeing into darkness is clarity...This is called practicing eternity....

— LAO-TZU

Fear gets its power from our not looking, at either the fear or what we're afraid of. Remember the attic or closet door behind which something terrifying waited, and the longer we didn't look, the harder it was to open that door?

As a boy this obsessed me until I would avoid that part of the house. But, finally, when no one was home, I felt compelled to face the unknown. I stood before that attic door for the longest time, my heart pounding. It took all my small inner boy strength to open it.

I waited at the threshold, and nothing happened. I inched my way in and stood in the dark, even longer, until my breathing slowed, and to my surprise, my eyes grew accustomed to the dark. Pretty soon, I was able to explore the old musty boxes, and found pictures of my grandfather, my father, my father, the only one in the family that I am like. Seeing those pictures opened me to aspects of my spirit.

It seems whatever the door, whatever our fear—be it love or truth or even the prospect of death—we all have this choice, again and again: avoiding that part of our house, or opening the door and finding out more about ourselves by waiting until what is dark becomes seeable.

- *Sit quietly and bring to mind a door you fear going through.*
- *For now, simply breathe and, in your mind's eye, grow accustomed to the threshold.*
- *For now, breathe deeply and simply feel safe around the closed door, vowing to return when you feel stronger.*

Why We Need Each Other

A blind child guided by his mother, admires the cherry blossoms....

— KIKAKOU

Who knows what a blind child sees of blossoms or songbirds? Who knows what any of us see from the privacy of our own blindness—and, make no mistake, each of us is blind in a particular way, just as each of us is sighted uniquely.

Consider how each of us is blinded by what we fear. If we fear heights, we are blind to the humility vast perspectives bring. If we fear spiders, we are blind to the splendor and danger of webs. If we fear small spaces, we are blind to the secrets of sudden solitude. If we fear passion, we are blind to the comfort of Oneness. If we fear change, we are blind to the abundance of life. If we fear death, we are blind to the mystery of the unknown. And since to fear something is thoroughly human, to be blind is unavoidable. It is what each of us must struggle to overcome.

With this in mind, Kikakou's little poem serves as an internal parable. For, in the course of our lives, we all stumble and struggle, repeatedly, in and out of relationship, and in and out of the grace of the hidden wholeness of life. It is, in part, why we need each other. For often our relationships help us experience the Oneness of things. We do this, in the course of our lives, by taking turns being the blind child, the loving guide, and the unsuspecting blossom—never knowing which we are called to be until we've learned what we are to learn.

- *Close your eyes and repeat Kikakou's haiku three times, and each time, identify with a different position.*
- *The first time, breathe slowly and become the blind child admiring the blossoms he or she can't see.*
- *The second time, breathe deeply and become the loving other, guiding his or her blind child to a beauty they can share but never experience the same way.*
- *The third time, breathe without thinking and become the cherry blossom itself that stops both those who can see and those who cannot.*

The Life of Experience

Even if one glimpses God, there are still cuts and splinters and burns along the way.

So often we anticipate a reward for the uncovering of truth. For effort, we expect money and recognition. For sacrifice and kindness, we secretly expect acceptance and love. For honesty, we expect justice. Yet as we all know, the life of experience unfolds with a logic all its own. And very often, effort is seen, and kindness is embraced, and the risk of truth is held as the foundation of how humans relate. However, the reward for breathing is not applause but air, and the reward for climbing is not a promotion but new sight, and the reward for kindness is not being seen as kind, but the electricity of giving that keeps us alive.

It seems the closer we get to the core of all being, the more synonymous the effort and its reward. Who could have guessed? The reward for uncovering the truth is the experience of honest being. The reward for understanding is the peace of knowing. The reward for loving is being the carrier of love. All becomes elusively simple. The river's sole purpose is to carry water, and as the force of the water deepens and widens the riverbed, the river fulfills its purpose more. Likewise, the riverbed of the heart is worn open over time to carry what is living.

All this tells us that no amount of thinking can eliminate the wonder and pain of living. No wall of avoidance or denial—no cause or excuse—can keep the rawness of life from running through us. While this may at times seem devastating, it is actually reassuring, because while the impermanence of life, if fixed on, can be terrifying, leaving us preoccupied with death, the very same impermanence, if allowed its infinite frame, can soothe us with the understanding that even the deepest pain will pass.

- *Bring into view a recent moment of disappointment.*
- *Was there a particular outcome or response you were secretly hoping for?*
- *Rather than focusing on the fact that what you hoped for didn't happen, try to understand what is at the heart of what you were hoping for: was it being heard, being accepted, being loved, being seen as someone of value, or simply the need to be held?*
- *Accepting this disappointment, try to understand what you received from the life of experience.*

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