



MARK NEPO

THE BOOK OF
AWAKENING

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

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.”

—ANGELES ARRIEN, PH.D., cultural anthropologist, author of *The Four-Fold Way* and *Signs of Life*

“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 graced with renewal.”

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

ALSO BY MARK NEPO

God, the maker of the bed, and the painter, 1988

Fire Without Witness, 1988

Acre of Light, 1994

Inside the Miracle (audiotape), 1996

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*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



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 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

FOREWORD

by Wayne Muller, author of *How Then Shall We Live*

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, or 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 in 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, crystal 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.



FEBRUARY 1

Live Slow Enough

Live slow enough
and there is only the beginning of time.

Follow anything in its act of being—a snowflake falling, ice melting, a loved one waking—and we are ushered into the ongoing moment of the beginning, the quiet instant from which each breath starts. What makes this moment so crucial is that it continually releases the freshness of living. The key to finding this moment and all its freshness, again and again, is in slowing down.

Often, when we are inconvenienced, we are being asked to slow down. When we are delayed in our travel or waiting for a check in a restaurant, we are being asked to open up and look around. When we find ourselves stalled in our very serious and ambitious plans, we are often being asked to re-find the beginning of time. Unfortunately, we are all so high-paced, running so fast to where we want to be, that many of us are forced to slow down through illness or breakage. In this, we are such funny creatures. If we could see ourselves from far enough away, we would seem like a colony of insects running into things repeatedly: thousands of little determined beings butting into obstacles, shaking our little heads and bodies, and running into things again.

Like the Earth that carries us, the ground of our being moves so slowly we take it for granted. But if you should feel stalled, numb, or exhausted from the trials of your life, simply slow your thoughts to the pace of cracks widening, slow your heart to the pace of the earth soaking up rain, and wait for the freshness of the beginning to greet you.

- *Place a dry sponge and a glass of water before you. Set them aside for the moment.*
- *Center yourself by letting the energy of all that feels urgent rush through you. Exhale and try to let it go.*
- *Now drip a small amount of water on the sponge and,*

as you breathe slowly, watch how the sponge opens.

- *Keep dripping water on the sponge as you breathe slowly, and feel your heart open.*

FEBRUARY 2

Two Heart Cells Beating

If you place two living heart cells from different people in a Petrie dish, they will in time find and maintain a third and common beat.

—MOLLY VASS

This biological fact holds the secret of all relationship. It is cellular proof that beneath any resistance we might pose and beyond all our attempts that fall short, there is in the very nature of life itself some essential joining force. This inborn ability to find and enliven a common beat is the miracle of love.

This force is what makes compassion possible, even probable. For if two cells can find the common pulse beneath everything, how much more can full hearts feel when all excuses fall away?

This drive toward a common beat is the force beneath curiosity and passion. It is what makes strangers talk to strangers, despite the discomfort. It is how we risk new knowledge. For being still enough, long enough, next to anything living, we find a way to sing the one voiceless song.

Yet we often tire ourselves by fighting how our hearts want to join, seldom realizing that both strength and peace come from our hearts beating in unison with all that is alive. It feels incredibly uplifting that without even knowing each other, there exists a common beat between all hearts, just waiting to be felt.

It brings to mind the time that the great poet Pablo Neruda, near the end of his life, stopped while traveling at the Lota coal mine in rural Chile. He stood there stunned, as a miner, rough and blackened by his work inside the earth, strode straight for Neruda, embraced him, and said, “I have known you a long time, my brother.”

Perhaps this is the secret—that every time we dare to voice what beats within, we invite some other cell of heart to find what lives between us and sing.

- *Breathe deeply in silence and feel the beat of your heart.*
- *Meditate on the common beat the cells of your heart carry.*
- *Let this beat sound like a beacon from you.*
- *As you enter your day, keep sending the beat of your heart to everything around you. Do this with your regular breathing.*
- *Be aware of the moments you feel energized or filled with emotion. It is in the life of these moments that you are in full relationship with the world.*

FEBRUARY 3

Yearning

Before we blink,
we know each other.

We speak before we speak, with eyes and lips, in how we tip our heads, in how we lean like trees tired of waiting for the sun. We tell our whole story before we even open our mouths. Yet we frequently pretend that nothing is conveyed. We pretend we are strangers and deny what we learn before words.

We are all made up of yearning and light, searching for a way out, afraid we will be shut in or cut off or repelled back into the ground from which we are reaching.

This is enough to begin: To know, before all the names and histories drape who we are, that we want to be held and left alone, again and again; held and left alone until the dance of it is how we survive and grow, like spring into winter into spring again.

- *As you move through your day, let in what you learn of others by how their being passes you.*

- *Without a word, bestow a blessing on each as they walk away.*

FEBRUARY 4

A Set of Inner Doors

The stuff of our lives doesn't change.
It is we who change in relation to it.

—MOLLY VASS

Whatever our gifts or wounds or life situation—whether we have been married several times or have never been in love, whether we have plenty of money or are sorely in need of more—the core issues of our lives will not go away.

There exists for each life on Earth a set of inner doors that no one can go through for us. We can change jobs or lovers, travel around the world, become a doctor or lawyer or expert mountain climber, or nobly put our life on hold to care for an ailing mother or father, and when we are done, though the worthy distraction could take years, the last threshold we didn't cross within will be there waiting. There is no substitute for genuine risk.

Stranger still is how the very core issues we avoid return, sometimes with different faces, but still, we are brought full circle to them, again and again. Regardless of how we may try to skip over or sidestep what we need to face, we humbly discover that no other threshold is possible until we use our courage to open the door before us. Perhaps the oldest working truth of self-discovery is that the only way out is through. That we are returned repeatedly to the same circumstance is not always a sign of avoidance, but can mean our work around a certain issue is not done.

In my own life, it is not by chance that struggling to adulthood with a domineering and critical mother, I have been thrust again and again into situations with dominant men and women, struggling painfully for their approval and fearing their rejection. For years, I tried to manage the circumstance better, which was like sanding and varnishing the door

without ever opening it. I was destined to repeat the pain of rejection, no matter how skillfully I handled it, until I opened the door of self-worth.

Even my calling to be a poet became a distraction that lasted many years. Feeling rejected and insecure at heart, I quietly made a mission of becoming a famous writer, only to find myself one day replaying the issues of approval and rejection a hundredfold at the mailbox, as I awaited word from countless critical strangers known as editors. I was stunned and relieved to finally discover myself at the same threshold of loving myself that I had run from years before.

The thresholds go nowhere. It is we who, in our readiness and experience, keep coming back, because the soul knows only one way to fulfill itself, and that is to take in what is true.

- *Meditate on an issue that keeps returning to you.*
- *Relate to it as a messenger and ask the messenger what door it is trying to open for you.*
- *How will your life change if you move through this threshold?*
- *How will your life be affected if you do not?*

FEBRUARY 5

Beneath Problem Solving

Beneath most headaches
is a heartache.

Often we find it easier to think our way around things rather than to feel our way through them: What can we do to pull ourselves out of a bad mood? What can we buy, remove, or repair that will reduce or solve a loved one's anger or sadness?

In retrospect, I realize I have spent many hours problem solving emotional facts I just needed to feel. I know now that my frequent labors to understand what went wrong, while somewhat useful, often were distractions from feeling the sadness and disappointment necessary to heal and move on.

It's all very human. No one wants to feel pain, especially when you can't quite point to a specific cut or wound. So it is with the heart. There's nothing to show or stitch up, yet everything is affected.

The truth is that while analyzing and strategizing and preparing ourselves can occupy our minds, and may even help prevent us from being hurt the same way twice, there is no substitute for giving the wound air, which in the case of the heart means saying deeply, without aversion or self-pity, "Ouch."

- *Sit quietly and allow a recent discomfort of heart to rise within the safety of your breathing.*
- *Breathe slowly and allow yourself to move through the discomfort by feeling it.*
- *Breathe deeply and trust that your heart has the wisdom to filter and process this discomfort, if you will only give it the chance.*

FEBRUARY 6

Along the Way

I learn, by going, where I have to go.

—THEODORE ROETHKE

We drove to a lake that one of us had heard of. Around it was a path. We brought a few simple things: bread, water, bananas. We circled the lake, stopping at certain patches of light. Huge acorns were dropping from the canopy and small ravens were preening on branches sagging over the water.

Along the way, Christine stopped, drawn to a clearing she couldn't walk by. We followed, stepping slower, breathing deeper, and off the path, the ancient trees were growing and we lost the urge to go at all. With nothing but each other and our breathing, we heard a thread of stream unravel in a song that birds imitate.

We didn't talk about it, but it is the path off the path that brings us to God. For our hearts are just small birds waiting.

- *Center yourself and imagine your life as a path about a beautiful lake.*
- *Breathe slowly and trace your path to where you are today.*
- *Breathe deeply and imagine tomorrow's part of the path coming into view. Smell the unmarked trails.*
- *As you enter your day, stay open to the unexpected clearings that call to you.*

FEBRUARY 7

A Legacy of Sadness

Atlas wasn't forced to hold up the world.
 He was convinced that if he didn't,
 the world would fall.

Many of us are raised by well-intending parents to be the carriers of their sadness. Often the one child who is softer than the rest, who is more sensitive than the family is used to, is the one selected to deal with what no one else will deal with. It is an odd fate.

I was one of those children. I was often called too sensitive, too emotional, too day-dreamy. But as I grew older, as life visited us with the hardships that life inevitably brings to all families, it was I who was needed to carry the burden of my family's inability to feel. Without having my capacity to feel ever valued or acknowledged, I was the one to shoulder the family sadness with the brunt of my heart.

I have come to understand that there is a huge difference between sharing someone's pain and bearing it. Too many times, those in pain use the concern of loved ones as a way to ground what they don't want to feel themselves. The way electricity runs off into the ground during a storm, they mistakenly use others to run their sadness and pain into the ground of those who care. Too often, we want others to hold our sadness or pain because we won't take the risk to ask them to hold us while we are hurting.

As an adult trying to be my own person, understanding

which feelings are genuinely mine and which are those I have inherited is often confusing. People like me, and maybe you identify, so let me say people like us, frequently feel responsible for the emotional condition of others.

It is delicate and never-ending work, this sorting of what is truly ours and what is not. When unable to stay within ourselves, we become codependent, never feeling at peace until the emotions of everyone around us are managed and tended—not so much out of compassion, but as the only way to quiet our anxious burden as carriers of sadness. Or when rebounding the other way, we can isolate, becoming not only dispassionate to others, but also numb to ourselves.

The work becomes that of making an accurate inlet of the heart without closing off to the feelings of others or to the depth of things that are ours to feel. Though some of us were trained to carry the sadness and pain of others, the fiber of the one heart we were given is strong and light enough by itself to bring us to the wind that is whispering, Let down, let go, the world will carry you.

- *If you are a parent, think of how you share your feelings with your child. If you have a lover, think of how you share your feelings in that love. If you have a close friend, think of how you share your feelings in that friendship.*
- *Meditate on the last time you shared a sadness or a pain with this special person.*
- *Through this example, look honestly at how you share such things and see if you try to transfer or unload your sadness or pain or if you simply give voice to what troubles you.*
- *If you can, recall your mood as you shared. Did you want the relief of surfacing what was building inside? Or did you want your loved one to make you feel better? Did you feel closer to yourself after sharing or more distant?*
- *If you think you have given them what's yours to carry, go to them and thank them for holding your sadness. Lift it off their hearts and take it back. Ask them to hold you instead.*

Greed

The greedy one gathered all the cherries,
while the simple one tasted
all the cherries in one.

We suffer, often unknowingly, from wanting to be in two places at once, from wanting to experience more than one person can. This is a form of greed, of wanting everything. Feeling like we're missing something or that we're being left out, we want it all. But being human, we can't have it all. The tension of all this can lead to an insatiable search, where our passion for life is stirred, but never satisfied. When caught in this mindset, no amount of travel is enough, no amount of love is enough, no amount of success is enough.

I am not saying that we shouldn't explore our curiosity and venture into the unknown. I very much want to experience the world and love to encounter new people in my life. What I'm referring to here is that seed of lack that makes us feel insufficient, and then, somehow, to compensate, we start to race through life with one eye on what we have and one eye on what we don't.

Greed is not restricted to money. It can work its appetite on anything. When we believe we are behind or less than, we somehow start to want more than we need, as if what we don't have will fill in our pain and make us feel whole, as if the thing we haven't tasted will be the thing to bring us alive. The truth is that one experience taken to heart will satisfy our hunger to be loved by everyone.

- *Bring to mind something you want to experience.*
- *Meditate on what this experience might give you.*
- *Breathe openly and meditate on what part of this gift is already at work in you.*

The Thing in the Way

We tend to make the thing in the way
the way.

We were up early, eager to walk the Botanical Gardens of Montreal, where they have the largest bonsai collection in the world outside of Asia. We strolled toward the Chinese Temple Garden, a lush yet simple retreat from the streets that covers acres, a place of renewal originally constructed in the 1600s in China and moved stone by stone to Montreal in 1990.

As we approached the massive gate, it was locked. I panicked, ready to demand entry after driving 400 miles from another country to see this. Robert calmly, like an Oriental sage himself, treated the situation as if it were a koan, a riddle to be entered until its very assumptions shifted.

He began to walk the outer wall of the Garden. It seemed insurmountable. I was frustrated. He kept walking slowly along the high wall. Since the Garden stretched for acres, I wondered if we would have to walk its entire perimeter. The thought made me cranky. He kept strolling.

Suddenly, when we had walked farther than was originally in our view, the walls disappeared. It turned out that the Garden had no walls, save for the facade at its entrance. So we simply walked through the open grass to a path that welcomed us.

How many thresholds that seem blocked or barred or locked only seem so from their initial viewing? How many opportunities for true living are barrier-free, if we can only remove ourselves and our minds from their traditional points of entry?

- *Center yourself and consider a barrier or threshold you are facing.*
- *Breathe slowly and relax your insistence. Stop beating the door down.*

- *Breathe evenly and circle the barrier or threshold with your spirit.*
- *Breathe patiently and see if there is another way in.*

FEBRUARY 10

What Your Life Asks of You

How are you tending
to the emerging story of your life?

—CAROL HEGEDUS
AND FRANCES VAUGHAN

Like many of us, I seem to be continually challenged not to hide who I am. Over and over, I keep finding myself in situations that require me to be all of who I am in order to make my way through.

Whether breaking a pattern of imbalance with a lifelong friend, or admitting my impatience to listen to my lover, or owning my envy of a colleague, or even confronting the self-centeredness of strangers stealing parking spaces, I find I must be present—even if I say nothing. I find I must not suppress my full nature, or my life doesn't emerge.

Aside from the feeling of integrity or satisfaction that comes over me when I can fully be myself, I am finding that being who I am—not hiding any of myself—is a necessary threshold that I must meet or my life will not evolve. It is a doorway I must make my way to or nothing happens. My life just stalls.

Tending our stories means that our lies must open if we are to live in the mystery; our ways of hiding, no matter how subtle, must relax open if we are to be.

- *Center yourself and meditate on the emerging story of your life.*
- *Breathe slowly and consider what your life asks of you so that it can emerge.*
- *Breathe fully and consider how you can better meet this inner requirement.*

Simplicity

I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the Source of Being.

—LAO-TZU

In the sixth century B.C.E., the legendary Chinese sage Lao-tzu gave us this threefold instruction. I will talk about simplicity here and devote separate entries later to both patience and compassion.

But regarding the three as a whole, let me confess that while stumbling about my own path, I have found that I must continually learn and relearn these things—not just once, but again and again, in deeper and deeper ways. They appear now like a spiral staircase and with each stepping, I find myself deeper in the life of my soul.

So, what does it mean to be simple? In a world that is complicated, we are often misled to believe that being simple is being stupid, when in truth, it holds the reward for living directly, which is that things appear, at last, as they really are.

How many times have I seen the gestures of a loved one or colleague and then struggled privately to uncover what it all really meant? How many times have I done everything possible but ask directly? How often do I refuse to be direct: not saying what I mean, not showing what I feel, not letting the life around me really touch me?

Amazingly, nothing else in nature is indirect. The leopard trying to scale the mountain strains and shows its effort. The frightened squirrel in the tree hovers and trembles, showing its fright. The wave mounting toward shore saves nothing as it bows and spreads itself over and over against a shore that openly crumbles to be so loved. Only humans say one thing and mean another. Only we go one way and wish we were somewhere else.

Like so many other tasks that await us, the reward is hardly what we imagine. It seems that Lao-tzu reveals to us a

secret tool of living, kept secret by our unwillingness to accept its truth. This ancient sage tells us quite openly that the act of simplicity—of living directly—is the doorway to the Source of all Being.

Imagine if this is true. I implore you, when feeling lost or far away, try it—try being direct—and the Universe without a word will come alive.

- *Breathe slowly and recall a time when things were direct and uncomplicated.*
- *Keep breathing slowly and recall a time when things were indirect and a burden.*
- *As you inhale, feel the burden.*
- *As you exhale, feel the simplicity.*
- *What did the burden take from you?*
- *What did the simplicity awaken in you?*

FEBRUARY 12

Making Tea

Given sincerity, there will be enlightenment.

—THE DOCTRINE
OF THE MEAN, 200 B.C.E.

If we stop to truly consider it, making tea is a miraculous process. First, small leaves are gathered from plants that grow from unseen roots. Then boiling water is drained through the dried leaves. Finally, allowing the mixture to steep creates an elixir that, when digested, can be healing.

The whole process is a model for how to make inner use of our daily experience. For isn't making tea the way we cipher through the events of our lives? Isn't the work of sincerity to pour our deepest attention over the dried bits of our days? Isn't patience the need to let the mixture of inner and outer brew until the lessons are fragrant and soothing on the throat? Isn't it the heat of our sincerity that steams the lessons out of living? Isn't it the heat of those lessons that makes us sip them slowly?

Yet perhaps the most revealing thing about all this is that none of these elements alone can produce tea. Likewise, only by using them together, can we make tea of our days and our sincerity and our patience. And none of it is healing without a willingness to drink from the tea of life.

- *Slowly, and with symbolic care, make a cup of tea.*
- *As the tea is steeping, be mindful of your life and how you bring your sincerity and patience to bear on your days.*
- *Sip slowly and feel gratitude coat your throat.*

FEBRUARY 13

What Is Not Expressed

What is not *ex*-pressed is *de*-pressed.

It seems the more we express, that is, bring out what is in, the more alive we are. The more we give voice to our pain in living, the less build-up we have between our soul and our way in the world. However, the more we depress, the more we push down and keep in, the smaller we become. The more we stuff between our heart and our daily experience, the more we have to work through to feel life directly. Our unexpressed life can become a callus we carry around and manicure, but never remove. Experience can in effect lose its essential tenderness and poignancy, as we mistakenly conclude that life is losing its meaning. To a man unaware of the cataracts filming his eyes, the world seems dimmer, not his seeing. How often do we find the world less stimulating, unaware that our heart is diminished because of its encasement in all that remains unexpressed?

Let me give a personal example. I have, for many reasons, including issues of my own making, forever felt invisible in family or group settings. Initially, this stemmed from fearfully pleasing a self-centered mother at all cost. It led to years of unexpressed hurts and rejections that accrued into a callus that guarded the heart within my heart. I am and have always

been a very open and emotionally accessible person, but at a certain depth, my core could not be touched. Though this started with Mother, it effected the level at which I could relate with anyone.

Eventually, this was not enough. I realized the world was not losing color, but that I was screening the deepest emotional colors out. That I state this so calmly and clearly in one sentence hardly reflects the difficult and slow, elusive way this awareness pained itself into my daily consciousness. Rather, it emerged in me gradually as I began to acknowledge and voice the feelings of invisibility I have carried all my life.

Whatever your own example, it seems our authenticity is tied to what is de-pressed and what is ex-pressed. Just as flowers need healthy root systems in order to blossom, feelings can only express their beauty when they are rooted cleanly within us, breaking ground in some manner, sprouting outside us. It is that delicate paradoxical inch of ground between surface and deep, between flower and root, between what is allowed out and what is allowed in, that continually determines whether we are living our lives or not.

- *Recall the last time you felt depressed.*
- *Sit quietly and look inside and see if there is anything lodged or pressing there against your mind or heart.*
- *It might be a disappointment or injury that you don't want to accept about yourself or others.*
- *Treat whatever you find like a splinter, and soften yourself with the slowness of your breathing, so it can be removed.*
- *As you breathe, remember that you are larger than this hurt pressing in on you.*

Love at First Sight

Where two deliberate, the love is slight.
Whoever loved, not having loved at first sight.

—CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE

The true power of love at first sight is often missed because we insist on limiting its meaning to the sweep of falling into another person upon first meeting. To appreciate the deeper sense of this, we must uncover and reclaim the importance of first sight itself, which has more to do with seeing things essentially, rather than physically, for the first time.

We all walk around within the numbness of our habits and routines so often that we take the marvels of ordinary life for granted. It is first sight that opens the freshness of each moment, unencumbered by any of our habits and routines. First sight is the moment of God-sight, heart-sight, soul-sight. It is the seeing of revelation, the feeling of oneness that briefly overcomes us when nothing remains in the way.

At its deepest and most real level, the notion of love at first sight is spoken of in every spiritual tradition as the reward for being fully awake. Such seeing anew restores our sense of being alive. Paradoxically, first sight is recurring. In the same way that we wake every day, we regularly return to first sight in the rhythm of our wakefulness of spirit. Whenever we can see with that original vision—with nothing between us and the life around us—we can't help but love what we see. To see so fundamentally opens us to love. To love so fundamentally is to see the world we're a part of as the vibrant, ongoing creation that it is. So, it really manifests this way: at first sight, we find love; at our first true seeing, the love that is already there touches us.

In this regard, first seeing is an ever-present threshold to the majesty of what is. Certainly and beautifully, this happens with other people when we, upon first truly seeing another, fall sweetly into the miracle of their presence. But this is also possible, on a daily basis, upon first truly seeing ourselves, our world, our sense of God—again and again.

I can work across from the same person for years, and one

day, because my own suffering has opened me more fully than I can remember and because the light floods that person's face, I can for the first time truly see who they are and feel love for them. I can walk by the same willow, season after season, and one day, because of the sheen of after-rain and the lowness of the wind, I can truly see the willow like never before, and feel love for the willow in all of us. I can, in the mirror late at night, after seeing myself hundreds of times, see the willow and the light and the other in my tired face, and know that sameness as the stuff of God.

In truth, it has never been about first meeting, though this can happen, but more about first coming into view. As a breeze all spun out lets the water go clear, we finally stop talking, stop performing, stop pretending, and all tired out, we go clear, and the heart that rests in everything beats before us.

- *Close your eyes and breathe away your mind-sight, your past-sight, your future-sight, your wounded-sight.*
- *With each slow breath, feel the cool air of your birth-sight, your first-sight.*
- *Breathe slowly and imagine that the beat of your heart carries up the beginning-of-time-sight.*
- *At the moment that you feel original, however briefly, open your eyes and bow with love to the first thing you see.*

FEBRUARY 15

Being a Spiritual Warrior

Until the heart becomes an inlet,
it cannot be free.

It is true; there is such sadness in the world. But there is a difference between feeling the pain of things breaking, ending, or drifting apart, and the sharper pain that comes from measuring the inevitable events of life against some ideal of how we imagine things are supposed to be. In receiving hardships this way, life is always a falling off. Life is hard enough

without viewing all our pain as evidence of some basic insufficiency we must endure.

There is a beautiful Tibetan myth that helps us to accept our sadness as a threshold to all that is life-changing and lasting. This myth affirms that all spiritual warriors have a broken heart—alas, must have a broken heart—because it is only through the break that the wonder and mysteries of life can enter us.

So what does it mean to be a spiritual warrior? It is far from being a soldier, but more the sincerity with which a soul faces itself in a daily way. It is this courage to be authentic that keeps us strong enough to withstand the heartbreak through which enlightenment can occur. And it is by honoring how life comes through us that we get the most out of living, not by keeping ourselves out of the way. The goal is to mix our hands in the earth, not to stay clean.

I remember, in getting to know a new friend, how we shared our stories in an increasingly personal way. As I kept taking my turn, I heard myself tell of loved ones who have died, of my struggle through cancer, of a marriage that, despite the deepest commitment, didn't last, of years of being rejected as an artist, of losing a teaching job that was dear to me, of suffering a brutal estrangement from my parents—and just as I was feeling a strength come over me for facing life and being authentic, he wiped his mouth and said, “What a sad life you've had.”

It took me some time to withstand his judgment and his pity, but I looked at him across the night and kept breathing deeply through the break in my heart. In daily ways, we are judged, discounted, and even pitied for glories that only we can affirm. In the end, life is too magnificent and difficult for us to give away our elemental place in the journey.

- *Stand quietly by the sink and let the water run.*
- *Close your eyes and meditate on how life—like the water you hear—runs through our broken hearts, cleansing our hurt.*
- *Breathe deeply and feel the mystery wash through the break in your heart.*
- *Open your eyes and enter your day.*

Misery

If peace comes from seeing the whole,
then misery stems from a loss of perspective.

We begin so aware and grateful. The sun somehow hangs there in the sky. The little bird sings. The miracle of life just happens. Then we stub our toe, and in that moment of pain, the whole world is reduced to our poor little toe. Now, for a day or two, it is difficult to walk. With every step, we are reminded of our poor little toe.

Our vigilance becomes: Which defines our day—the pinch we feel in walking on a bruised toe, or the miracle still happening?

It is the giving over to smallness that opens us to misery. In truth, we begin taking nothing for granted, grateful that we have enough to eat, that we are well enough to eat. But somehow, through the living of our days, our focus narrows like a camera that shutters down, cropping out the horizon, and one day we're miffed at a diner because the eggs are runny or the hash isn't seasoned just the way we like.

When we narrow our focus, the problem seems everything. We forget when we were lonely, dreaming of a partner. We forget first beholding the beauty of another. We forget the comfort of first being seen and held and heard. When our view shuts down, we're up in the night annoyed by the way our lover pulls the covers or leaves the dishes in the sink without soaking them.

In actuality, misery is a moment of suffering allowed to become everything. So, when feeling miserable, we must look wider than what hurts. When feeling a splinter, we must, while trying to remove it, remember there is a body that is not splinter, and a spirit that is not splinter, and a world that is not splinter.

- *Breathe steadily and focus on one thing that is annoying or paining you. It might be how your car is running, or how your relationship is running, or how your sleep was disturbed by the noise of strangers.*

- *Breathe deeply and, keeping what is bothersome in view, widen your focus.*
- *Breathe thoroughly and accept the energy of all that exists outside your bother.*

FEBRUARY 17

Endgame

Now there's nothing left
but to keep dancing.

I don't know if it is human nature or the way of life on Earth, but we seldom become all of who we are until forced to it. Some say that something in us rises to the occasion, that there is, as Hemingway called it, "a grace under pressure" that comes forth in most of us when challenged. Others say this talk of grace is merely a way to rationalize hard times and painful experience, a way to put a good face on tragedy.

Yet beneath all the talk of tragedy and grace, I have come to believe that we are destined to be opened by the living of our days, and whether we like it or not, whether we choose to participate or not, we will, in time, every one of us, wear the deeper part of who we are as a new skin.

Either by erosion from without or by shedding from within—and often by both—we are forced to live more authentically. And once the crisis that opened us passes, the real choice then becomes: Will we continue such authentic living?

It is no secret that cancer in its acuteness pierced me into open living, and I've been working ever since to sanctify that open living without crisis as its trigger. But can this be done without crisis pushing us off the ledge? That's the question now, years from the leap—how to keep leaping from a desire to be real, so as not to be shoved by an ever-lurking crisis.

Perhaps the greatest moment of shedding and breaking for me came as I was being wheeled to rib surgery. I found myself numbly afraid, spinning from the Demerol shot, watching the

hospital ceiling roll on by, and I found myself repeating over and over the following words as I waited on my stretcher:

“Death pushed me to the edge. Nowhere to back off. And to the shame of my fears, I danced with abandon in his face. I never danced as free. And Death backed off, the way dark backs off a sudden burst of flame. Now there’s nothing left, but to keep dancing. It is the way I would have chosen had I been born three times as brave.”

We are often called further into experience than we’d like to go, but it is this extra leap that lands us in the vibrant center of what it means to be alive.

- *Sit quietly with a trusted loved one and discuss a time of adversity you have endured and what it opened in you.*
- *Now that the adversity is behind you, how has your inner view of life changed?*
- *Discuss what it is like for you to sustain these new inner ways.*

FEBRUARY 18

When Feeling Stuck

The same stream of life
that runs through the world
runs through my veins.

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE

We are so achievement-oriented that we often surge right by the true value of relating to what’s before us, because we think that accomplishing things will complete us, when it is experiencing life that will.

Yet, if we can outlast the urge to judge everything we encounter, a miracle starts to surround us in which painting, music, poetry, running water, flowers, wind through trees, open vistas—all touch and draw out their counterpart that lives quietly within us.

The nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins

called this inner terrain “inscape.” And just as no landscape can flourish without sun and water, our inscape must be irrigated and drenched with many forms of life if we are to thrive.

So, when feeling stuck or disconnected from the miracle of life, as will happen to us all, try to listen, see, feel, and just take in. Try to let the energies of life stir their counterparts within you.

In order to be whole, suspend your criticism. For life is not a matter of taste, but of awakening, not a matter of finding things pleasing or disturbing, but of finding things completing, not a matter of liking or disliking, but of opening the geography of one’s soul.

- *This is a meditation done to music. Close your eyes and listen to a piece of music that is new to you.*
- *As you breathe evenly, allow yourself to feel your like or dislike for it, and try to let that go.*
- *As you breathe, allow yourself to meet the sheer energy of the music with the sheer energy of what is new in you.*

FEBRUARY 19

Instead of Breaking

The glassblower knows:
while in the heat of beginning,
any shape is possible.
Once hardened, the only way
to change is to break.

With the precise tools of modern medicine, unborn children who are malforming or experiencing obstructions can now be operated on in utero. Profoundly, these state-of-the-art techniques reveal a deep timeless truth about growth and healing. For just as amazing as the fact of these operations, is the fact that these surgeries leave no scars once the infant is born.

What this tells us is that if we tend to things at the deepest level, our repair will be so much a part of who we are that there will be no scar. It is easier to bend underneath the surface, in the deep timeless fluid of the beginning, than to break once fully grown.

But it is too late for me, you might say, I am already full-grown. Not so, for in the world of our inwardness, we are always growing and are blessed to carry that fluid beginning within us. It is never really out of reach.

We can return and begin again by facing ourselves. In this way, we can go below our hardened ways to the soft impulses that birth them. Instead of breaking the bone of our stubbornness, we can nourish the marrow of our feeling unheard. Instead of breaking the bone of our fear, we can cleanse the blood of our feeling unsafe. Instead of counting the scars from being hurt in the world, we can find and re-kiss the very spot in our soul where we began to withhold our trust.

- *Sit quietly and bring to mind an aspect of your personality that tends to get in the way. It might be your own brand of stubbornness or distrust or envy.*
- *As you breathe steadily, allow yourself to trace this trait to its soft beginning.*
- *Without trying to name it or change it, simply surround this soft inner spot with your love.*

FEBRUARY 20

Nicodemus and the Truth

How can one be born again?

—NICODEMUS TO JESUS

I often think of Nicodemus, the one Pharisee who secretly believed in Jesus and who would meet with him anonymously at night to have deep spiritual conversations, but who would never acknowledge his questions of spirit or his association with Jesus in the light of day. Of course, this did nothing to the essence of Jesus, but traumatically thwarted and plagued Nicodemus for the rest of his days.

This story shows us the quiet pain that comes from not honoring what we know to be true, even if all we know to be true are the questions we are asking. It is even more useful to realize that we each carry a Jesus and a Nicodemus within us; that is, we each have a divine inner voice that opens us to truth and a mediating social voice that is reluctant to show its truth to others.

The famous British child psychologist D. W. Winnicott called these aspects of personality our True and False Self. It is the True Self that lets us know what is authentic and what has become artificial, while the False Self is a diplomat of distrust, enforcing a lifestyle of guardedness, secrecy, and complaint.

In everyday terms, this means that each time we experience a change in reality as we know it, we must choose whether to declare or hide what we know to be true. At such moments, we either need to bring the way we have been living into accord with that shift of reality, or we need to resist the change. Thus, in daily ways, whether we live in our True or False Self depends on our willingness to stay real. And so, over time, staying real becomes the work of keeping our actions in the world connected to the truth of our inner being, allowing our True Self to see the light of day.

Very often, we continue, out of habit or fear, to behave in old ways, even though we know that the way of things has changed. Time and again, I have found myself at this crucial juncture: having to admit that what was essential is no longer essential and then needing to summon the courage to make the act of living essential again.

I know that every time I hear or see the truth but hold to the old way—of being or thinking or relating—I am giving my life over to the Nicodemus in me. And in so doing, I embark on a divided life, in which I listen to the divine inner voice secretly at night, but deny it day after day.

But this moment of inner embarrassment, when we catch ourselves in the act of split living, is also the recurring chance for us to honor once again what we know to be true. For anyone, no matter how wounded or distressed, can in a moment of truth let the God within show itself out here in the world. However small or fleeting, this one repeatable act can restore our common and vital sense of being alive.

- *Sit quietly and recall the last time you felt a moment of inner embarrassment—that is, the last time you realized what you were doing was no longer authentic, but you kept doing it anyway.*
- *If you can, meditate on what made you keep doing what you knew to be untrue. What were you afraid would happen if you honored the truth as you felt it?*
- *If a similar situation were to happen tomorrow, how might you act differently?*
- *If you can, don't blame yourself for struggling like Nicodemus. Rather, comfort the Nicodemus in you that it is safe to honor what it knows in the light of day.*

FEBRUARY 21

Cleaning Out the Wound

If I had experienced different things,
I would have different things to say.

So often, I have felt troubled and guilty bearing witness to my pain, and yet, not to makes things worse. Somehow, in saying just what Mother had done in her cruel need to be the center, or just what Father couldn't do out of his fear of facing my mother; somehow, telling the truth as I know it makes me feel like a bad person—as if I'm making my pain up, as if I'm hurting others by saying bad things about them.

But the unshakable bottom of all this is that I'm not making things up. If I have unkind things to say, it's because I've experienced unkind things. And so, my only guide in this witnessing is to be accurate and honest. While I am not a victim, I didn't ask for certain shaping experiences to happen to me. I didn't ask to be slapped or ridiculed as a boy or to be mistreated by lifelong friends later in life. In truth, If I had experienced different things, I would have different things to say.

What is most healing about bearing witness to things exactly as they are, including my own part in my pain, is that when the voice of the pain fits the pain, there is no room for

distortion or illusion. In this way, truth becomes a clean bandage that heals, keeping dirt out of the wound.

To voice things as they are is the nearest medicine.

- *Center yourself and, in the safety of your heart that has carried you this far, give voice to a wound you carry.*
- *Breathe deeply and try to be accurate, naming all those responsible for the wound, including yourself, if that is the case.*
- *Soothe the wound with your deepest breathing.*
- *Soothe yourself with the cleanness of the truth.*

FEBRUARY 22

Opposing Voices

Let the opposing voices in your head speak.

They are only finding their part
in a larger, yet-to-be-heard song.

Being alive is a paradox, an ongoing mix of things that on the surface don't always seem to make sense. But voicing what doesn't seem to make sense helps. It's like an orchestra tuning up to play together. We have no chance of discovering the fullness of our inner music, if we don't let the players in our hearts and minds and spirits tune.

Often, confusion is the tension of trying to make sense of things too soon, before enough of the inner players have learned their parts. Often, experience is the way that the heart and mind and spirit practice what they need to play.

Isn't the trail of our relationships the time it takes for the heart to practice its part in the movement we call Love? Isn't the trail of our honest questions the time it takes for the mind to practice its part in the movement we call Wisdom? Isn't the trail of our changing beliefs the time it takes for the spirit to practice its part in the movement we call God?

And isn't our trail of Oneness, those brief moments when everything comes together, isn't this the time it takes for Love and Wisdom and God to bring the common place in us alive?

- *This is a guided thought meditation. Center yourself and bring into view an issue that carries indecision or confusion for you right now.*
- *Though it will feel initially chaotic, breathe slowly and let the opposing views of this issue bubble up uncensored.*
- *Take your time, breathe deeply, and let the opposing energies play themselves out.*
- *Rather than struggle to understand how these things go together, breathe steadily and, as if each energy is an instrument, feel the duet they are trying to play in you.*
- *Enter your day humming that tune.*

FEBRUARY 23

To Hold Nothing Back

To hold nothing back
 in every breath
 is a spiritual practice.

For forty-nine years I have found that hesitation, more than anything, has been the invisible hitch that has kept me from joy. I've found that the moment with all its meaning often moves on by the time I've reconsidered whether or not to enter it. I am not saying we should always be impulsive. More to the point, I have discovered, again and again, that I usually know what I need to do but just deny it, and it is this small hesitation, this small resistance to enter what is real, that makes life feel neutral or out of reach.

To hold nothing back in every breath means staying committed to letting whatever we experience make its way in and letting whatever is in make its way out. Holding nothing back means holding the intention to be an open vessel, in a daily way.

Simply and profoundly, our very breath can serve as a reminder that life is only possible if the exchange of inner and outer is undisturbed. Letting things in, feeling their impact,

and, in turn, letting things out, expressing cleanly what we feel, is a spiritual practice that rinses the mind and heart.

- *Meditate on a glass of water.*
- *When feeling centered, drink the water slowly without hesitation.*
- *Exhale deeply and say softly to yourself: I will hold nothing back in my effort to live. I will not hesitate to be.*

FEBRUARY 24

Behind the Urgency

When feeling urgent,
you must slow down.

I learned this, over and over, during the many crises of cancer. Unless someone is bleeding or can't breathe, unless there is some true physical requirement to act swiftly, a sense of urgency is a terrible illusion, a trick that happens, again and again, because life inside our skin and outside our skin are forever different.

It is as hard as it is humbling. When feeling like I can't sit still, I need, more than ever, to sit still. When feeling like I will die if I don't have your approval, I need, more than ever, to die to my need for your approval. What we need is always harshly and beautifully right before us, disguised in the wrapping of our nearest urgency. We just refuse to accept this, because it feels so difficult to face.

The doorway to our next step of growth is always behind the urgency of now. Now more than ever, when all feels urgent, you must cut the strings to all events. Now more than ever, when the weights you carry seem tied to your wrists, you must not run or flail. Now more than ever, when each decision feels like the end, you must believe that each question is a beginning. Now more than ever, when you fear that being who you are is a knife to those you love, you must be strong inside where no one has seen you, for loving from there can only make those you love grow. Now more than

ever, when feeling that you are the source and recipient of all pain, you must bow your head till the ancient channel from sky to heart can reopen, till you remember that you are a blessed piece of spirit-dust in spirit-wind. Now more than ever, you must breathe till your ounce of breath becomes the sky, again and again.

In this way, pray to know your place in the human family like you've never known it. In this way, pray to have your True Self inch through your turmoil. In this way, love yourself the way you love the emptiness of time. Love yourself the way you love your children or your dog or your dearest friend, without reservation. In this way, today with all its hardships will spill into tomorrow, and decisions will become as clear as streams thawing.

- *Center yourself and feel the urgencies that pull at you.*
- *Feel the tension of each like a string stretched taut.*
- *With each breath, untie yourself, one urgency at a time.*
- *However briefly, breathe freely, even for a moment, untied to any urgency at all.*

FEBRUARY 25

Cutting a Path

No matter where we dig or climb,
we come upon the fire we left untended.

Carl Jung had a dream that he was cutting a path in the woods, unsure where it was leading, but working hard at it nonetheless. Tired and sweating, he came upon a cabin in a clearing. He dropped his tools and approached the cabin. Through the window he saw a being in prayer at a simple altar. The door was open and Jung went in. As he drew closer, he realized that the being in prayer was himself and that his life of cutting a path was this being's dream.

What Jung brings to us is the never-ending task of deciding to whom we entrust our life: our True or False Self. For

all the seriousness with which we run about in the world—fixing, denying, projecting, and sacrificing—for all the schemes and strategies and alliances and positioning for reward, it is all an unreal dream to the center of our being that waits for us far inside while we hack our way through.

Without knowing it, we, like Jung, work hard at cutting a path to our deeper self that waits patiently for us to arrive, all tired, aching, and out of breath. Once that path is cleared and once the being at our center is discovered, we can return to the world in relationship with our soul. We can discover a deeper, more peaceful sense of home.

- *Be still and close your eyes, and as you meditate, journey inwardly to the cabin where your soul awaits.*
- *Drop all you are carrying at the door. Drop all that waits to be done. Or redone.*
- *As you breathe, enter the cabin and wait with open arms for the center of your being to realize you are there.*
- *As you breathe, feel your soul embrace you. Embrace back. Savor that moment.*

FEBRUARY 26

At the Pace of What Is Real

Stop talking, stop thinking,
and there is nothing you will not understand.

—SENG-TS'AN

Like most people I know, I struggle with taking too much on, with doing too many things, with moving too fast, with overcommitting, with overplanning. I've learned that I must move, quite simply, at the pace of what is real. While this pace may vary, life always seems vacant and diminished when I accelerate beyond my capacity to feel what is before me.

It seems we run our lives like trains, speeding along a track laid down by others, going so fast that what we pass blurs on by. Then we say we've been there, done that. The

truth is that blurring by something is not the same as experiencing it.

So, no matter how many wonderful opportunities come my way, no matter the importance placed on these things by others who have my best interests at heart, I must somehow find a way to slow down the train that is me until what I pass by is again seeable, touchable, feel-able. Otherwise, I will pass by everything—can put it all on my résumé—but will have experienced and lived through nothing.

- *Consider three things you must do today.*
- *Carefully put two down.*
- *Immerse yourself in the one thing that is left.*

FEBRUARY 27

The Ropes and Wheels That Carry Us

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty—
that is all you know on earth,
and all you need to know.

—JOHN KEATS

These are the famous last lines of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” uttered by the young English poet dying of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four. The poem is an understandable complaint by a tender being against the harshness of life. But suddenly, by voicing his pain of living, the young poet comes upon a profound realization.

When Keats says, “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” we are forced to ask: Are they the same? Deeply, I think not. Rather, like X and Y chromosomes, they make up the fundamental elements of life that no one can do without. They are the yin and yang of existence—one cleanses the wound, while the other heals the wound.

This is “all you need to know.” Beauty, wherever we find it, is the salve that keeps us vital and fresh. But Truth, in its uncompromised and naked story, no matter how harsh, has a Beauty all its own that is cleansing.

This is why we must remember the Holocaust and other atrocities exactly as they were. This is why it is essential to bear honest witness to our own naked stories.

Still, as wise as the message he came upon is, there is an equal lesson in how young Keats came upon it. For only by voicing our tender pains can we find our way to the deeper Beauties and Truths that like ropes and wheels can carry us.

- *Sit quietly and feel your own tenderness in being alive.*
- *Breathe slowly, and as you inhale, allow the naked truth of one tenderness to cleanse you.*
- *Breathe fully and, in the next breath, allow the beauty around you to revitalize the place in you that is raw.*

FEBRUARY 28

The Stones at Chimayo

I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to
dance.

—E. E. CUMMINGS

On the way to Chimayo, a woman saw two Spanish farmers repositioning stones in a riverbed to redirect the flow; she felt compelled to help. She had the feeling that this had been done for centuries—their mothers and fathers, their grandmothers and grandfathers, each in their own time and way, picking up the same stones pushed about by storm or drought and putting them back so the water can continue.

It seems this is the never-ending work of relationship, each of us in our own time and way moving the stones between us, repositioning the heavy things that get in the way, so the life of feeling can continue.

The weather of simply living jams things up, and we, like every generation before us, must roll up our pants and sleeves, step into the river, and unclog the flow. Of course, we need to ask, What are the stones pushed about between us? What are the heavy things that keep getting in the way?

No doubt, they are infinite and particular, but often, they are made of habits of not: not seeing, not hearing, not feeling, not being present, not risking the truth, not risking the heart's need to live out in the open.

That we close off, jam up, spill over, and dry up are all part of being human in the gravity of time. That we feel compelled to stop and help even strangers move the heavy thing out of the way is an impulse known as love.

- *Identify something heavy within you that seems to be in the way.*
- *Does it have to do with a habit of not? If so, try to name what it is you are not allowing to flow freely within you?*
- *If you are not seeing, breathe slowly and begin the vow to see. If you are not listening, breathe slowly and begin the vow to listen.*
- *Be honest in assessing how heavy this stone in you is.*
- *If you need help in moving it, whom will you ask and when?*

FEBRUARY 29

Who's to Say

Who's to say
the effort to be real
isn't the beginning of wings?

Who's to say that the budding of wings from the ribs of small birds doesn't begin with the impulse within them to live? Who's to say that the butterfly breaking through its cocoon isn't the result of its being tired of living in a tight weave of its own making?

Who's to say that the migration of flamingoes from South America to Africa doesn't begin with a yearning to eat the yellow ribbon that keeps lining the horizon?

And who's to say the color of passion doesn't line our faces the instant we grow tired of living in a tight cocoon of

our own making? Who's to say the journey to love doesn't begin the instant we give voice to that loneliness that no one wants to hear? Who's to say the journey to peace doesn't sprout like a small wing the instant we let our feelings find their place in the world?

In truth, every effort that is allowed its full beat within will ripple as a birth of some kind in the world.

- *Center yourself and breathe deeply.*
- *At the high point of inhalation, imagine the still center as the inner sun of spirit.*
- *Let it flood you with its light each time you exhale.*
- *Enter your day, inviting one deep feeling to sprout from you.*



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Mark Nepo is a poet and philosopher who has taught in the fields of poetry and spirituality for over twenty-five years. Nominated for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, he has written three books, *Acre of Light*, *Fire Without Witness*, and *God, the maker of the bed, and the painter*, and has contributed to numerous anthologies. As a cancer survivor, he remains committed to the importance of inner life. Through both his writing and teaching, Mark devotes himself to the life of inner transformation and relationship, exploring the expressive journey of healing where the paths of art and spirit meet. For eighteen years, Mark taught at the State University of New York at Albany. Currently, he serves as Scholar-in-Residence and Senior Advisor for the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a nonprofit foundation devoted to the wholeness of mind, body, and spirit as it informs our individual and communal health. He lives in Albany, New York, and continues to give readings, lectures, and retreats.

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