



Episode 23: Mark Nepo—

How does a poet pray?

Thursday, February 20, 2020

[music] *You are not moving, you are being moved.
You are not singing, you are being sung.
You are not praying, you are being prayed
Prayed at the speed of love.*

Janet Conner You are not moving; you are being moved. You are not singing; you are being sung. You are not praying; you are being prayed, prayed at the speed of love. I'm Janet Conner, *Prayer Artist*, and you have arrived at speed of love timing to episode #23 in this, my new podcast, *Praying at the Speed of Love*.

I created this podcast because I wanted to talk about something that just isn't talked about in popular media: prayer, prayer. But when I say prayer, I am not talking about the tight, small box that all, all of our patriarchal religions have stuffed prayer into. I'm talking about real prayer, original prayer, mystical prayer, prayer that is forever ancient and yet somehow, paradoxically, mysteriously, at exactly the same time, prayer that is always new. This is real prayer, living prayer, breathing prayer, dancing prayer. This is the prayer that fed our hearts and sparked our creative imaginations long, long before patriarchy arrived on the scene, and it is prayer that is doing exactly the same thing for us right now in this pregnant time of transition.

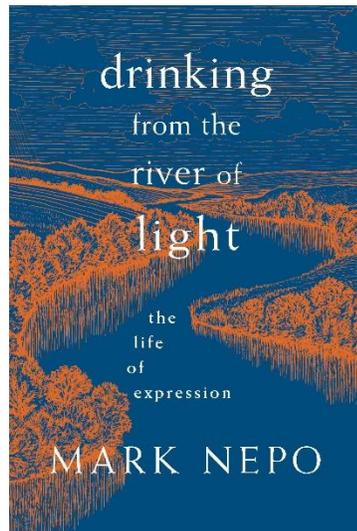
As patriarchy dies, comes to its natural completion, falls to the ground, no longer able to hold us together, no longer able to bring us into wholeness, it's prayer that will lift us, hold us, and feed us as together we build a new kind of world, an inclusive world, a world that makes love visible for everyone, for everyone, everywhere, and for Mother Earth herself.

If you've been listening to me for a while, you know I pay attention to the numeric vibration of the number of the episode. Okay. So it's episode 23. Two and three is a five. Now, I'm not a professionally trained numerologist. I have a half a dozen, dozen books on numerology, and I like to look at what is the meaning, what is the mystical meaning of the numeric vibration in a number. So what is five? It's change, but it's divinely guided change. And that divine change, something we're all so hungry for right now, in the five is created by the two and the three. So

what's the two? It's the divine feminine. One is the sacred masculine; two is the divine feminine. And what is three? Three is the divine child, the completion of the trinity. Look at a triangle. Three is creative expression.

So in astonishing synchronicity—you know I don't plan this and can't plan this—our 23rd conversation today just happens to be about creativity, creative expression. So who could possibly be our guide, right? Who is our guide into a very deep conversation on creativity, creative expression as prayer, as mystical calling, as the expression of love? I think you know it's got to be Mark Nepo.

Mark Nepo is a man who has heard and answered the call to creative expression for 40 years. You have loved him. You have loved all his books beginning with *The Book of Awakening*. Do you know she is now celebrating her 20th anniversary? But that was just the first step, the beginning. Since then, Mark has written countless books, including a few favorites of mine: *More Together than Alone*, *The Endless Practice*, *The Exquisite Risk*. But his newest one, the one we're going to talk about today, is very dear and very special to me and I think to everyone in the *Praying at the Speed of Love* community. Listen to the title: *Drinking from the River of Light*, and the subtitle is *The Life of Expression, The Life of Expression*.



Well, in this conversation on the life of expression, you know there's something waiting just for you. There's a reason that you are here by divine appointment, by the five, to open and receive a gift of divine change. That change is going to come as love. There's a nugget of love waiting just for you. It's hovering in the air, waiting to enter your heart, your soul, your body, to transform your life. So let us

begin this conversation listening to the call of the Tibetan bowl as she invites us to open our invisible ears that we may hear what wants to be heard.

[the bowl rings]

She's very gentle. I don't know if the microphone even can pick up her gentle, gentle song. I think this means we need to really pay attention, listen fully and openly and completely to Mark Nepo on creative expression. Mark joins us from his home in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Welcome, Mark. And he's not alone. Who's with you, Mark [laughter]?

Mark Nepo My wonderful yellow lab, Zuzu. Yeah. She's always with me. We're like Velcro [laughter].

Janet Conner So this podcast is about prayer, but of course, I perceive prayer, you perceive prayer in this vast... I think every poem you've ever written is a prayer.

Mark Nepo Yeah. Well, thank you. Yes.

Janet Conner How can we begin?

Mark Nepo Well, it makes me think, we're talking about Zuzu, but I think and I invite our listeners that I feel like prayer is a threshold of inhabiting our spirit here. And it comes in the simplest ways. I mean, when we give our full attention, and I agree when we listen... it's interesting that in the Judeo-Christian tradition in the West, understandably, we mostly pray when we want to get out of trouble or out of pain or out of fear or out of a difficult situation. It's totally understandable, but I've learned in my life that prayer is really listening, not asking for anything. And so when we're, through great love or great suffering, reduced to being quiet and open, then we receive. And so to go back to what we were starting with, so I find that when I can be very present, however briefly, that's what opens up prayer and ritual. And when I'm not present, as sacred as that is to me, whatever it is will become a habit, and presence is the difference. Wholeheartedness is the difference between ritual and prayer and habit.

And being human, nobody can be wholehearted all the time. We fall down; we get up. We're confused, and we're clear. So when I am wholehearted, those really sacred movements become open thresholds of prayer, and when I'm not, they just turn into habit. So one of the kind of I guess you would say vows or prayers that what I do simply every day... it's how I start my day, and I invite people, you can just do your own simple thing. But I do three things every day when I get up.

The first is I open the blinds so that I'm letting light in. And the second is I take care of Zuzu, so I take care of something living. And then the third is... my wife's

a night person, Susan, and I'm a morning person. So I always make her coffee before she gets up. So I consciously start my day by very simply letting light in, tending something that's living, and caring for someone I love. And they're very simple gestures. And if I feel pressed in the day or I have something that's a deadline and I just go through that and I'm not present, then they just turn into habits. But when I can stop and remember why I'm doing these simple things, they remain holy, and they become prayerful acts. So I invite people who are listening, you can create your own, one, two, whatever it might be, that every day you embody some small, prayerful act.

Janet Conner So can we have a poem, a prayer, [crosstalk]?

Mark Nepo Yeah, actually, yes. Sure. Let me start with a poem that will really speak to the evolution of my understanding and experience of prayer. It's a newer poem. It's called "At Every Turn."

When I sweat trying to lift
what no one can lift,
I am praying.

When I fly 1000 miles to be
stopped by the moon on the
spine of an ancient mountain,
I am praying.

When I fall on the lawn in laughter
with my dog and she won't stop
licking my face,
I am praying.

When you are winded by the light
on the photo of your mother
who died so suddenly,
you are praying.

When your grief lets you feel the
pain of those you don't know,
you are praying.

When life moves through us
for no reason,
we are all praying.

I am humbled that all my efforts
to pray have failed, until
living is praying
with no intent.

Now, my heart is plucked
like the string of a harp
at every turn.

Janet Conner That is perfect. Is that published yet?

Mark Nepo No, not yet. That's in a book that's in progress.

Janet Conner It's just perfect. Thank you.

Mark Nepo Oh, thank you.

Janet Conner So this is what you know about prayer now. What did you know about prayer, feel about prayer, learn about prayer as a little kid? How were you taught to pray?

Mark Nepo It's interesting because I grew up in a Jewish immigrant household a generation down from the Holocaust, Russian, Eastern European Jewish heritage. And my parents, out of the Great Depression, they were very intelligent, bright, but they were really kind of agnostic/atheistic Jews. And so I saw that they didn't really talk about prayer, but they had a mystical poet for a son, which was kind of a surprise. And so I would ask all these questions, and they would be very kind of frustrated that I would ask all these questions. But I felt like whenever they were authentic and real, I felt like they were in prayer. Now, they wouldn't use the language or call it.

And I know that I was bar mitzvah'd, and though the process was not terribly enriching or fulfilling—it was like the community going through the motions—but I had this connection with the chanting. Even though I didn't know what everything meant, I had this real connection with the chanting and when the Torah would be spoken and sung on Saturdays. And so I kind of was in my own listening because we weren't taught thoroughly what the Hebrew language meant. We were just taught how to say and sing what we needed to get through to get bar mitzvah'd, so it wasn't a great education. But I was exposed to it, and I had my own kind of deep experience with the river of those ancient melodies.

Janet Conner And I think just about everybody, if you grew up in any kind of tradition, has had that experience. For me, Irish Catholic, it was Gregorian chant. I never knew what anybody was saying, but who cares? Who cares? It's Latin; it's in three-part harmony. You're surrounded by this sound. Doesn't matter. I had no idea what we were saying or chanting. It was gorgeous, and it's like you're dropping into... even at 7 or 13, right, you're about 13, I think?

Mark Nepo Yeah. Yup, yeah.

Janet Conner So even if you're not intellectually aware of it, looking back, I feel like in my confirmation, which would be the comparable experience, there's this awareness while you're singing. Not—I'm with you—memorize this thing. Don't forget to walk up to the altar on the right hand side. Eh, who cares? But there was this like a body memory, and I think what we're remembering is our ancestors going back who knows how—

Mark Nepo Well, yeah. This ties into what the book, *Drinking From the River of Light*, is so much about because whenever, like we're talking... that was an early experience. But what I would offer and what I've learned is that whenever we can give our whole presence and be engaged to whatever is before us or whatever is calling us, that engagement brings our heart alive. And when the heart's alive, it's like a lightbulb; it's like a filament. Then we are connected to a source that moves through us, that it doesn't start with us; it doesn't end with us. And what plugs us in is our full, holding nothing back, giving our presence.

And so what I've learned over time and as you know from our other talks and my work, a lot of people know I'm a long-term cancer survivor, and one of the things that happened in that being turned upside down and inside out was that the whole creative process was revealed in a different way to me. And so it's not so much what we create, it's how we are created for giving our all to it.

So the image here that comes—it's at the center, the metaphor of this whole book—is the notion of breathing. So we have to inhale and exhale. We can't say on this interview we're just going to inhale only. No, that's not going to work. And likewise, the heart has to inhale and exhale. And the way the heart inhales is by perceiving and feeling, and the way the heart exhales is by a personal form of expression.

Now, that can be in what we know as the normal arts or what we call the arts, but let's open it wide up. It could be taking car engines apart and putting them back together. It could be a love of repairing antique furniture. It could be gardening. It could be writing thank you notes, or it could be... one of the things... my wife, Susan's a potter, but one of her great, I just admire, is that she is the supreme gift giver. I mean, she will do research and find out as much as she can about anyone she's going to give a gift to so that hopefully what she gives will be something that will bring them alive or help them grow.

And so we have in our modern world such a manufacturing imprint on our consciousness that, even with good intention, we're going to create or produce great work, hopefully, even with a devotion. Well, having almost died and being blessed to still be here, it all got turned upside down. It's not about the work; it's about the immersion and how we are created for that engagement. And when we

do that, we're drinking from the river of light, and so I really encourage everyone to be open to their own personal form of expression because what is not expressed is depressed. And so the heart has to breathe; in whatever way calls to us is what we need to follow.

So here's a great example. There's a couple of stories that are just remarkable. One is how Albert Schweitzer became Albert Schweitzer. So Albert Schweitzer, a lot of people don't realize, he was a tenured philosophy professor at the University of Vienna, and he was around 40 years old. And he was also a gifted classical organist, so in his free time, he would travel on a concert tour around Europe to sold-out houses, playing classical music on the organ. Then only one thing happened, and who knows what kind of prayerful state he was in, when all of a sudden... he wasn't asking for anything, but he heard that he was called to start a hospital in Africa. There's only one problem: he wasn't a doctor.

So he brought this to respected people in his inner circle, friends, people, and he said, "You know, I think I'm supposed to do this. What do you think?" And two or one, they said, "Are you crazy? You're tenured. You're known as a gifted organist. Just forget about it." And of course, he went back and listened further, and he resigned and went to medical school and became a doctor and became Albert Schweitzer.

Now, there's one other story I want to share that goes with that because it's not just about... you could hear that and say, "Well, we have to be ready to change everything." Well, yes, but also it could be that we're called to just go deeper where we are, so it's not about staying or leaving. It's about giving ourselves completely to what we receive and hear that brings us closer to life.

So the story about staying devoted to his call goes back to the Middle Ages, just before the Renaissance, with the sculptor Ghiberti. Now, Ghiberti in Florence... in Florence, there is the great cathedral, The Duomo, and most big cathedrals in Europe had little... they were kind of like sheds, but they were called the Baptistery. And so they were accompanying sheds, which were quite amazing buildings unto themselves, and Ghiberti, in the late 1300s, was commissioned to create the doors to the Baptistery of the cathedral in Florence.

And they're enormous. They're like 11, 12 feet high. You can google them online, and you can see them. They're in relief. There are dozens of human figures that are literally coming out of the door, this bronze, golden door. And he spent 25 years fashioning these figures, who they look like people that were dipped in gold. And as the Renaissance was beginning and as he was working on this, other artists were excited and saying, "That's great. That's wonderful, but come with us. Let's do something new." And Ghiberti said, "I'm happy for you, but I think I'm where I'm supposed to be. I think I'll just stay here."

And so it's not about leaving and being willing. I think we have to be willing to do whatever is called, whether it's giving up everything that we know or through our presence of heart to go even deeper into what we're doing and stay where we are. And we won't know that until we listen, until we listen to what comes when we open our heart.

Janet Conner Well, I'm a little teary listening to Albert Schweitzer because, although it's not as dramatic, when I was awakened in the middle of the night on February 25th of 2018 and clearly hearing in my left ear, "*Prayer Artist*," even in that moment... I do sleep with paper, and I rolled over in the dark and wrote the word *Prayer Artist* on this yellow pad of paper. And my stomach went *heh heh heh uh* because I had a life. I had seven books. I had my yearly courses. I thought I knew who I was and what I was doing, and it was good work.

But the next day in deep soul writing, I'm sobbing on the pages, and I said to Beloved Vibration of Sophia!, which is the name of the divine feminine for me, and I said, "I do not know what this means, but I'm pretty sure it changes everything. And I'm scared." And then I took a breath. But I wrote, and for me and maybe this is true for you, man, when it's in writing, it's non-negotiable. I said, "But if you want me to be your *Prayer Artist*, I will be your *Prayer Artist*." Instantly, Mark, and I know you understand this, the first prayer came through. I didn't have to edit it. I just had to type it up. I went, "Well, okay."

And I did change everything. I changed what I teach. I changed how I write. I changed the future books I'm going to... I changed everything. I changed this podcast because if you say yes to opening a hospital in Africa, to spending 25 years on the door, whatever it is... look at you. You've spent 40 years listening and doing what you're called to do.

Mark Nepo Oh, well, yes, and it's a blessing because we find joy there, and I think that whatever it might be... and this is about the deeper call to say yes to life, which we know doesn't always mean saying yes or surrendering or acquiescing to everything. Sometimes we have to say no to difficult or oppressive situations or relationships in order to say yes to life.

But if we look at Mechthild, who was a German female mystic in the Middle Ages in Germany, and she said, "A bird doesn't fall from the sky, and a fish doesn't drown in water. Each creature must find their God-given element." And I think that's what everything we're talking about is that each of us, through our courage, the quiet courage to be who we are everywhere... it's our authenticity of being, our authority of being, which comes from the authority of all being, and allows us to start to find our God-given element, to find where we can really grow.

I've come to think over the years that our career is our soul's awakening; where that happens is our occupation. And that can change. And so I've been blessed. Yes, I've been doing this for 40 years, but it's been a complete joy. It's where I learn; it's where I grow. That's why I live in that space. It is like a fish finding their water, or a bird finding the open sky and being able to have space to open your wings and glide. And so, again, I encourage everyone who's listening, "Well, gee, I don't have that," or, "I don't know what that is," I think the first thing for any of us is accepting the truth of where we are, being present, holding nothing back, and opening our heart. And whatever moment of connection we get, I would encourage following it, following it because that is the trail that's being left to us to follow to find our joy.

I have a poem. Let me read this poem called "The Appointment." So yeah, this is about that.

"The Appointment"

What if, on the first sunny day,
on your way to work, a colorful bird
sweeps in front of you down a
street you've never heard of.

You might pause and smile,
a sweet beginning to your day.

Or you might step into that street
and realize there are many ways to work.

You might sense the bird knows some-
thing you don't and wander after.

You might hesitate when the bird
turns down an alley. For now
there is a tension: Is what the
bird knows worth being late?

You might go another block or two,
thinking you can have it both ways.
But soon you arrive at the edge
of all your plans.

Now, the bird circles back for you
and you must decide which
appointment you were
born to keep.

Janet Conner I love that so much.

Mark Nepo Thank you.

Janet Conner Birds in particular... I've noticed this in conversations people have in my prayer intensive communities are about birds. Birds will come and visit, and indeed the very first mystical message, the very first mystical messenger in my life was an osprey. And when I see an osprey, I pay attention. I look up. I say hello. I ask, "What message do you have for me?"

I was being driven to an event I was doing in Minneapolis several years ago, and I think it was maybe the very beginning of spring, the end of winter. This is not exactly osprey territory in Minneapolis, and as my sister is driving me on the freeway, the freeway, she says, "Oh." And I look up and there's an osprey on the light pole, and my sister and my sister-in-law kind of went, "Excuse me. There's no ospreys on light poles on Highway I-95," or whatever it was. And I just went, "Hi! Thanks for coming. You're blessing me." It does seem that birds in particular... but you had a fabulous message from an apple tree. If there's one story in this book I want the listeners to hear, it's the apple tree. Tell us about that.

Mark Nepo Well, this is a very moving, transformative moment for me. And you know what? Let's also be clear that no one chooses transformative moments. They choose us. We never know where they are. We never know when they're going to happen. And again, it's great love and great suffering, often together, that open us up to our full possibility.

So this was during my cancer journey, and I was in my mid-thirties. And I had had a bone marrow sampling and a spinal tap in the same day and was sent home. And so back then, I think it's a little different now, a little better, but back then you had to lie still after a spinal tap for six hours to eight hours so the spinal fluid could regenerate. Because if you moved without it being regenerated, you'd get a migraine.

And of course, being in my thirties, I was on the couch where I was living at the time, and I couldn't be still. I kept moving around. And of course, I kept getting terrible headaches, and it was finally like, "Okay. Are you going to be still? Are you getting this message yet? I mean, you can have another one if you want, another migraine. Keep going." And so when I was finally still because I couldn't take another headache and I looked out our front window, there was an apple tree, which was there the whole time I've lived there. I'd been there about six, seven years at that point. And I'd seen it hundreds of times, but I had never really seen it, beheld it.

And the apple tree, when I opened my heart, when I was broken from all of this open, it was as if the apple tree was speaking to me, though not in words. But its

presence seemed to say, "When you survive this, and you will," and that was key because I wasn't sure that I was going to survive at all, "When you survive that, no more making things up. You will bear witness to the miracle of what is in all its splendor and its harshness." And so that really transformed me and had so much to do with my work once I was blessed to still be here.

We're taught all as artists in any art form that if we're good artists, we will be diligent and look for good material. Well, this changed everything because I don't have to look... everything is good material. Everything is miraculous. As Keats famously said, "Truth and beauty, that's all we know, and all we need to know." And so it's whether I am open and present enough to receive the miracle in everything, and when I am, I can write about anything that's in front of me. And so it's not a matter of me looking for good material. It's about me opening and centering myself and being present enough and wholehearted enough that I can receive the miracle. And so we think of miracle as something extraordinary, but the lasting miracle is being gifted through the scouring of life with the lens of the miraculous so that we are blessed to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

And so what I talk about in the book—years later, my understanding, I would frame it this way—is that I looked at that tree 100 times and I may have even had good insights about the tree, but that's western perception. What I talk about as Indigenous perception is when I don't just observe or draw insight or wisdom from what's before me, but I relate to it. I actually am in conversation and relationship with it, and that opens up Indigenous wisdom.

So another example of this would be we like to see ourselves in the West, in the modern world really—when I say the West, I mean the modern, global world because that mentality is everywhere now, not just in the West—we see ourselves as the author of all of our experience. We like to play God rather than be God-like, be of God. We like to play God. I created this.

And so a good example of this is that we participate in a living creation. And so one day after my grandmother, who was very dear to me, more like a mother to me than my own mother, she had passed... and I still dream about her just 30, 35 years later. But somewhere along the way after she'd been gone several years, 5 years, 10 years, I had this powerful—we all have these now and then—vivid, vivid dream, so much of a dream that I was really missing her and I felt like it was a visitation. That's how real it felt. And so of course, I got up, and people around me and even myself, I said, "Oh, well, I dreamt of her because I missed her so much."

Well, that precludes the chance of the miracle and the truth that she visited me because I missed her. So as long as we insist that we're the author of everything, we cut ourselves off from the ordinary miracle of oneness, of connection, of the

fact that whatever form she might be in... and I don't think she's, I mean, who knows, but I don't think she's somewhere in the form I knew her as. But somehow, because I missed her so much, she visited me, rather than me saying, "Well, I missed her, so I conjured her. I conjured her." And so this all cuts us out of participating in the living miracle of oneness that everything is connected, everything.

Janet Conner I feel like you really capture—and I don't hear other people talking about this—this essence. To me, it's a mystical essence, and funny enough, it's in an English grammar passive voice, active voice. Every bloody English teacher and editor, they want to hack out... I've got manuscripts where those red pens are cutting out that passive voice, and I would argue about it and say, "But no. It feels right." But the English teacher or the editor would win. And then along comes Mark Nepo. It made me so happy I actually shouted just reading it because you said, "It's the receptive voice."

Mark Nepo Yeah. And the way I came to articulate this was because we're even biased in the structure of our language to doing over being. And so we say that, "Oh, you need to write in an active voice, and if it's not, it's called a passive voice." Well, this is like the opposite of rational is not irrational; it's intuition. So again, when we say things, we don't say what they are, we say what they're not. We're not really approaching them. And so, likewise, it came up in one of my books that I was speaking about metaphor, that the metaphor is seen, is seen, and I had an editor try to correct that and say, "No, you see the metaphor." And I said, "No, you've just changed the entire meaning because I am saying that the same way the vista from the top of a mountain is there whether I climb it or not, the metaphor is there to be seen whether I am open enough to see it or not or whether I've done the journey to get to where I can see it. The metaphor exists beyond my agency." And when we insist on the active voice, again, when we insist that we're the creators of all of our experience, we cut off 90% of the dynamic spirit of all the ways we're connected and that we are not the only agents of life.

And this is what Martin Buber, in his great contribution *I and Thou*, Martin Buber, the great philosopher, what he was basically saying was that what he means by I-Thou is that he would say, "When we can regard everything we encounter as an authentic living center, then God will appear as the unrehearsed dialogue between two living centers." So we all know this. When we stop long enough and we're out on a walk and suddenly the wind through a certain tree stops us and it seems extra real, it's because we're regarding it as a life unto itself and now the presence of spirit appears, the connection appears, the oneness of life appears. Same thing, people are only strangers until we let them in. Then they were never strangers. They were just friends we hadn't met, and so it's the same thing.

But the opposite of I-Thou is I-it, as Buber talked about that. When I don't regard other living things, people or objects or nature, as having a life unto themselves, well then that unrehearsed dialogue, that presence, that light, doesn't show up because I'm making it all about me. And so, therefore, it doesn't show up, and I'm I-it-ing, I'm exploiting, I'm using things rather than relating to things and people. So it's a powerful, powerful thing, and again, we can slip in and out of this because if I am in pain or worried or moving too fast, I start to treat people as objects. And the prayerfulness, the connection, the oneness, the Thou-ness is gone. It's not gone, but I've lost access to it.

And this is actually at the heart... I discovered this when I was doing my book on community, *More Together than Alone*. It was just very important for our time. One of the great stories—we all know it somewhat, but I looked into it more deeply—is the Tower of Babel story. So let me tell it to you briefly.

So the Tower of Babel, which as we understand is the myth or the story by which everybody on earth came to speak different languages, but the heart of this story is very profound. So as best we can know that this story goes back to the land of Uruk, which is now where Iraq is, interestingly enough, in the Middle East. And at that time, it was believed that the human tribe was big enough that it couldn't stay in one place but small enough that it was really one community, one family, one human family. And the elders of that family said, "As our children and our children's children start to grow and move and migrate away, let's build a tower taller than anything that's ever been built so that when they lose their way or long to come back, all they have to do is look up and they can find their way home."

Now, that sounds like not a bad idea at first glance, and so they started building it. Well, it took a long time to build. This is before machines. There were no cranes. It was all by hand. And so finally, we have sons of the elders and grandsons and daughters of the elders continuing to build the tower. And two things started to happen.

The first thing is you had someone building someone else's dream. Now, there's nothing wrong with... I can have a family business and wholeheartedly keep that tradition going, but I have to find my own direct connection to the dream and not just do it because it was my grandfather's. Because when we start to lose that connection, this is what starts to happen. So it took so much effort to climb and put the next brick in place, a year, that when someone slipped and fell, they mourned the brick over the worker. So when you start to build someone else's dream, you start to value things over people.

So another thing started to happen up there. Now that they're up there and they're building someone else's dream, these people are saying, "God, why are we still building this goddamn tower? It's beyond me," but they were so far up, they said,

"Hey. As long as we're up here, let's loot heaven." And, of course, the story is that God knew this was going to happen and as soon as they started to loot heaven, the word is that he confounded their tongues and they couldn't understand each other, and therefore, they couldn't build anything together. And they dispersed, and they were all speaking different languages. And this is how, supposedly, we came to have different languages on earth. But the deeper spiritual story here is that once we stop having a direct connection and building our own dream, we start to value things over people, and then we lose the ability to understand each other.

So the opposite story to this or the anecdote to this is the story of Peter after Jesus is resurrected. I mean, just imagine, right, your beloved teacher, friend, you've already mourned that he's dead, and then you run into him. And so it defied anything that he could possibly put into words, but there he was trying to put into words to an assembled crowd. And this is the story of speaking in many tongues that he was just speaking from his deepest heart, and there was an assembled crowd of who knows how many, 500, 600, 800 people, speaking five, six different languages. But because he was speaking from the center of his heart, they all understood him somehow. So what this tells us is that, yes, when we build someone else's dream, when we value things over people, we lose the ability to understand each other, but all we have to do is speak from our heart and we can re-find the one common tongue.

So the question is for anyone who's listening, because everyone is subject to this—this is an archetypal story everyone is subject to—"Are you valuing a brick over a person in your life right now? And if so, what can you do to put the brick down?" Because the first step toward peace, the first step toward oneness, toward regaining that connection of I-Thou-ness, is putting the brick down whatever the brick may be, whether it's your push to meet a deadline, whether it's your insistence on a certain goal. Whatever it might be, put the brick down.

Because one thing I've learned through my time on earth is that when we count and compare, we can't be present. As soon as we count or compare, we're no longer present, and it doesn't matter whether we count or compare up or down. We could be dear friends, and I respect you. And you inadvertently say something that's hurtful to me, and I start counting and comparing and trying to make it so it's not so hurtful because I respect you. And I go over it, and I go over it. I've got to drop it and be present because the only way to reconnect to our innate worth is through presence, not through counting and comparing. And you may hear this and say, "Well, it's not good to count and compare, so I'm not going to do that." Oh, yes, we will because we're human. So it's not about not doing it. It's not about demonizing it. It's about recognizing when we do it and returning to being present. It's about recognizing when we are giving ourselves away to someone else's dream and putting the brick down and speaking from our heart.

In this moment is the prayerful moment, wherever you are, because the temple is the world. It's not in a building anywhere. The temple is the world, and when we currently make these choices to open our heart, to put down the brick, to see ourselves in the stranger before us...

There's a tradition in the Hindu tradition—and you'll find this in India in all these ancient temples—that, at first, it's an odd thing because there are these steps, and then the last step before the threshold to the temple is three times the size of the other steps. And at first, people in the West think, "Oh, well, they weren't good architects." No. They knew exactly what they were doing. That last step is made extra high so that you have to extend effort before crossing into the threshold of the sacred. And typically, on either side of that threshold are two statues: one that represents fear and one that represents attachment.

And so we are challenged every day to put in the effort and not worry if we do it gracefully or awkwardly or climb on our bellies to get over that last step, so we can put down what we're attached to and not be governed by fear. And then we have a chance to enter the temple that is the world. And no one knows how to do this, which is why we need each other.

Janet Conner We do it together.

Mark Nepo We do it together.

Janet Conner We do it together. And you have given us such an important book. I don't even want to call it a book. It's alive, and the stories in it are alive.

Mark Nepo Oh, thank you.

Janet Conner Well, and there's a line in it. I mean, it literally took my breath away that you started on page 44 a chapter by saying, "The role of the poet and the artist is to keep the world together." You just helped us find a way to keep the world together.

Mark Nepo Well, a joy. Thank you, thank you.

Janet Conner Oh, so beautiful. I do love this metaphor of the river, so where's the river taking you next?

Mark Nepo Well, I'm working on yet another book, and I'm teaching. I'm loving being in this kind of conversation with people wherever I go. And in addition to my travel, which will pick up next week actually... well, when this airs, I will be going to New York to the 92nd Street Y to teach on March 29th. But I'm also teaching, in addition to traveling, courses for small groups here where I live in Kalamazoo, Michigan. And this coming year there are three different formats.

One is a weekend course, which will happen in August, and another is a deep dive... and each of these groups there's no more than 30 people so that we keep it small and intimate. And the second one in July format is a deep dive where people come for six days, where we're together in this kind of space for six days. And the third is a year-long journey that the same group comes together for four weekends over a year, which is a very special kind of journey, which I've done for several years now. And the year-long journey I will continue to do.

So people can look to my website, marknepo.com, or the sister website, threeintentions.com, all one word, and there is a video on the home page with a link to a page that has all the details about these three courses and how to register right there. And if any of them are... especially if the year-long course is full, I really encourage you to sign up on the waiting list even though it won't be till the next year because we do look to the waiting list first before opening it up to the public. So your interest will be honored even if it's a year out. If it's something that's of interest to you, please put your name on the waiting list, and we'll contact you first before going public to fill the course.

Janet Conner So all of that is on the Show Notes page at my website, janetconner.com/23. This is the 23rd episode. You can get a transcript of the show. Now, I've been taking copious notes, and I want to read that transcript [laughter]. There is such beauty on that transcript. Thank you to Maureen Carter in Canada, who creates them for us. And I've also been taking notes, and I will be putting on the blue Prayer Action box some of the ways that you can bring what Mark talked about to life in your life. Because although sometimes we'll say listeners, you're not a listener. This is so much bigger and richer and more interactive than that. And so, not that it's comprehensive—Mark's given us 25 ideas—but I'll have five or six of them on the Show Notes page.

And then the most fun you can have, you click on Prayer Bag #23, and you will receive an excerpt from *Drinking from the River of Light*. And then come, join the conversation, click on the Facebook group. You do have to ask to join, and you can meet other members of the community that are loving these conversations and bringing them to life.

So this feels a little bold to be reading a poem to a poet but—

Mark Nepo Oh, no. Please—

Janet Conner —I had to work up my courage to do it because I do it at the end of every show, and I have to [share?]

Mark Nepo Please do, please do.

Janet Conner These are given to me in the receptive voice. I have to read this one because it really feels like this is an ode, to use the old poetic language, this is an ode to the

passive voice, to the receptive voice. And it is the source of the music that Sofia created for this podcast. So in gratitude to Mark, here is my receptive voice prayer called "Do You Feel That Breeze?"

Do you feel that breeze?

The doors and windows in the house of your soul are open
and the sacred breath flies right through you

On the breeze come love songs

They move your feet
They sway your body
They open your throat

And you begin to sing

But you are not moving
You are being moved
You are not singing
You are being sung
You are not praying
You are being prayed—
Prayed at the speed of love

Your prayers have changed, haven't they?

Once, you prayed prayers of wanting
filled with words of sharp intent:

I need this
I want that
Protect me
Defend me
Comfort me
Hold me
Give me

Once you asked questions
Hundreds and thousands of questions
Each one cracked a window a bit more

But now your prayers have no questions
No questions you recognize
You stopped asking that something arrive
And started asking to be led

Smiling, the breeze complied:
Open your eyes—your other eyes
Open your ears—your other ears

And the edges of your words began to dissolve
until they collapsed completely
unable to carry the weight
of your hunger for love

Laughing, the breeze got stronger, faster, wilder
And you moved
You moved where it wanted you to go

And now the breeze has secrets to tell you

It sings love songs
It sings the love songs of the day
And it sings the love songs of the night

And you begin to sing

But you are not moving
You are being moved
You are not singing
You are being sung
You are not praying
You are being prayed—
Prayed at the speed of love

The doors and windows in the house of your soul are now flung open wide

But the walls, the walls still stand
What of them?
They're made of salt

And look... the rain

T. Frantzich This conversation in the mystic with *Prayer Artist* Janet Conner has been rated L.

[music] *You are not moving, you are being moved.
You are not singing, you are being sung.
You are not praying, you are being prayed
Prayed at the speed of love.*