drinking

from the

river of

light

MI MENTALIKAN KULIHA

the life of

expression

MARK NEPO





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Part 1 Basic Human Truths

The fundamental truth of being human is that we are incredibly sensitive creatures whose joy and pain are registered through that unique sensitivity. This sensitivity allows us the gift of seeing and perceiving. This sensitivity allows us to make sense of being alive. Unlike any other form of life, being human allows us to fit things together or to break things apart.

Inhabiting the art of expressing ourselves is what lets us fit things together rather than break things apart. The art of expressing ourselves—what we experience, what we feel, what we think, and what we imagine exists within us and beyond us—is a form of inner breathing. And so, we each must learn how to do this or we will cease to exist. If you stop breathing, you will die. If you stop expressing, you may still walk around and buy groceries and pay the bills, but you will not be alive.

This lifelong process of weaving what enters us with what rises within us is the necessary art by which we lift the veils between us and keep the world together. As life marks us up, we keep playing the chord in our heart, which echoes the inner experience of truth. We discover, one experience at a time, that a life well lived is well expressed. When most vibrant and vulnerable, we live as a tuning fork, releasing the one conversation that never ends—the conversation of listening, expressing, and creating life.

This part of the book describes the ongoing relationship between the forces of life and our human nature, and the risks necessary to be fully present to whatever comes our way.

Why Write

Any "discovery" we make about ourselves or the meaning of life is . . . the coming to conscious recognition of something, which we really knew all the time, but, because we were unwilling or unable to formulate it correctly, we did not know we knew.

W. H. AUDEN

W ARATY ARANK LINA MAY

The Thread

Thirty-four years ago, in my mid-thirties, I was working hard at becoming a good poet when I was thrust into my journey with cancer. The torque of that experience pulled me from all my goals and routines and aspirations. I was left in the raw, uncertain simplicity of being alive and trying, by any means possible, to stay alive. I had few native gifts to help me through. The one closest to my heart was the aliveness of expression that lived below my want to be a poet. And so, I began to journal daily about my deepest fears, feelings, pains, and dreams—about the prospects of living and dying. I didn't think of it as "writing" or as "material." More, I was climbing a rope of honest expression, day by day, into tomorrow. It became a muscular and tender, honest space in which I began to access my own inner healing. This was my first in-depth experience of writing as a spiritual practice.

Years later, I read William Stafford's poem "The Way It Is," which I share here:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread. To discover the thread that goes through everything is the main reason to listen, express, and write. Years after this, I learned about the Buddhist myth of Indra's Net, which encircles the Earth. At every knot in the net is a jewel in which you can see all the other jewels and the entire net reflected. This is a metaphor for our part in a living Universe. For each soul is such a jewel, which when clear, will reveal all the other souls in existence as well as the net of being that connects us.

I began to understand that listening, expressing, and writing are the means by which we stay clear, the inner practices by which we realize our connection to other souls and a living Universe. So, to discover the thread that goes through everything is not only how we survive the tumble through life, it is also the way we inhabit our connections. In truth, when we listen, express, or write, we wipe our jewel clean and sustain the threads that hold the world together.



To discover the thread that goes through everything is the main reason to listen, express, and write.

An Invitation to Follow the Thread

 William Stafford speaks about a thread that goes through everything which we need to follow to recover our well-being. In your journal, begin to describe what stays constant for you, whether you are lifted into joy or thrown into pain or sadness. Over the years, how have you talked about this constancy that you experience and to who? Given all this, how would you describe the thread that runs through everything, as you experience it today?

• Wait a week and discuss the thread, as you know it, with a friend or loved one, asking how the thread appears to them.

The Necessary Art

E ach of us is called to listen our way into the underlying truth that connects us all, though we experience this calling as a very personal journey, the way plants and flowers grow and blossom differently, though they all root in the same soil. This rooting and breaking ground until we flower is the necessary art of coming alive.

As Rainer Maria Rilke offered in his legendary *Letters to a Young Poet:* "Go into yourself and test the deeps in which your life takes rise; at its source you will find the answer to the question whether you must create."

I would take this further, because I believe we all must create—that is, we all must root and break ground until we flower. This necessary art of coming alive is not reserved for the few. It is every person's destiny, though there are always things in the way. Not because we're unlucky, but because this is the nature of our time on Earth.

In your mind's eye, imagine a wave building and cresting as it approaches shore, only to have the undertow pull it back out, only to have that returning water gather itself into another wave that will build and crest again on shore. In this way, we are called to gather ourselves in order to come forth into life, and the difficulties—like fear, pain, worry, confusion, and loss—comprise the undertow that pulls us back. Until we can gather ourselves again. And paradoxically, it is the undertow that swells into the majesty of the next wave. This is the human journey.

And poetry is the unexpected utterance of the soul that comes to renew us when we least expect it. More than the manipulation of language, it is the art of embodied perception—a braiding of heart and mind around experience. When a fish inhales water, somehow it mysteriously and miraculously extracts the oxygen from the water. Through its gill, it turns that water into the air by which it breathes. This ongoing inner transformation is poetry. A much deeper process than fooling with words. For us, the heart is our gill and we must move forward into life, like simple fish, or we will die. And the mysterious yet vital way we turn experience into air, the way we extract what keeps us alive—this is the poetry of life that transcends any earthly endeavor. All this while the Universal Ground of Being we call Spirit is working its unknowable physics on us, eroding us to know that we are each other.

As sheet music is meant to be played, poetry is meant to be felt and heard. In this way, what we feel in our depths is poetry waiting to be voiced. And just as music, once heard, stirs our very being, voicing our feelings stirs our consciousness. After all these years, I can affirm that the gift of poetry is how it allows us to be intimate with all things.

In modern times, there are two very strong yet subtle ways that we are darkly conditioned away from our intimacy with life. Both are difficult to shake. One is the manufacturing mindset by which we turn everything into a product: our time, our love, our dreams, our worry, our fear, our art. The other is the way we are taught to place ourselves with authority at the center of all existence. In essence we are taught to play God, to be minicreators who control everything we come in contact with. This can distort all artists, especially writers.

I have learned over time, after being battered and smoothed by experience after experience, that creativity, whatever form it takes, is less about creating something out of nothing and more about being in relationship and conversation with life and the unknown. The more we engage expression and writing as a way to listen and to stay in relationship with life, the more sacred our path. We are not meant to bend material to our intent, but to bend our will to give voice to life and its rhythms. After my struggles with cancer, I began to learn that what is not ex-pressed is de-pressed. And so, I've become more interested in the expressive journey of healing than creative writing. Ultimately, the purpose of art in all its forms is to make life real, to remove everything that gets in the way, and to help us live.

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

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

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

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



The purpose of art in all its forms is to make life real, to remove everything that gets in the way, and to help us live.

An Invitation to Listen with Your Heart

- If our heart is our gill, describe an experience that moved through your heart and the one essential thing your heart extracted from this experience that has helped you stay alive.
- In your journal, describe the kinds of things you listen for and give attention to. Are they aspects of nature? Are they pieces of music? Are they stories of certain people in your life?
- In conversation with a friend or loved one, discuss how the nature of how you listen has evolved over the years.