

EPISODE 206

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:02.7] PF: Welcome to episode 206 of Live Happy Now. This is your host, Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. I'm so excited about this week's guest and I think you're going to like what we have in store for you.

Mark Nepo is a poet, philosopher, best-selling author and teacher who has been called one of the finest spiritual guides of our time. With his latest book, *More Together Than Alone*, he looks at how despite our increasingly global existence, we've actually become more isolated and divided. The stories in his book each hold a lesson that we can learn from today and use to create a more hopeful world for tomorrow.

Let's hear what Mark has to say.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:40.8] PF: Mark, welcome to Live Happy Now. I've got to say first of all, it's really an honor and a pleasure to have you on the show today.

[0:00:47.4] MN: Oh, thanks so much. I appreciate being here with you.

[0:00:51.3] PF: You've written a book, *More Together Than Alone*, that is really fascinating and really timely. What I found interesting was learning that you took 12 years to write this. It seems like something that just in the last say three years, has become particularly relevant. Can you talk about what led you to write this and why that process began [inaudible 0:01:13.2]?

[0:01:14.7] MN: Sure. Yeah. The timing that it was done in the world now is way beyond me. I started working on this 12, 13 years ago. I was just really compelled and interested in stories of moments when we've worked well together, and the lessons of those stories. I wasn't looking to create or discover some social theory, or pattern. I simply wanted to gather stories across history and across cultures of how we are more together than alone, because I really believe in

and I think this book affirms it that there is a lineage of interdependence and care that is as old as human beings.

When I look back further, like where did that come from in me to want to do that? Well, I think I'm now I'm 68, but in my 30s as you might know from my work, I'm a long-term cancer survivor and almost died in my 30s. I think looking back, one of my first real, raw, tender, unbreakable experiences of community were in those waiting rooms and treatment rooms. All of a sudden, you're thrown in a waiting room with people you don't know. Forget being polite and all the kinds of ways we're told to behave in public. All of a sudden, you're sitting next to someone and you go, "How you doing?" They go, "Not so good."

You say, "I'm scared." They're, "Me too." Then you're all of a sudden on this deep journey together and helping to save each other's lives. That authenticity and that vulnerability has always stayed with me as one of the elements of health and of being alive. I think I started to look for where's the trail of that and in our history as human beings.

[0:03:21.2] PF: Where did it take you initially, as you started pulling that thread and unraveling that mystery, can you tell us the journey that you walked down to start writing this book?

[0:03:32.9] MN: Well actually, when I first started writing, I was curious like, I happened and just – I dedicate the book to the great historian Howard Zinn. I didn't know him well, or long. In the time that I – chance to meet him, I was able to interview him once in depth and then spend some time with him later. It was such an inspiration, so I asked him. I had just started to explore this. I said, "I'm really intrigued with this. Do you think this makes sense? You're such a historian." He said, "Oh, definitely," he said.

He gave me this powerful, which I used from that conversation as the quote to open the entire book. He said, "You know, when the Wright brothers first flew that very first plane for 27 seconds," he said, "Everybody knew it was just a matter of time." He said, "Why not socially? Why not culturally? Why not with community?" He said, "If we can have moments where we are more together than alone," he didn't use that phrase, but when we can have moments like that, it's just a matter of time till we can actually live like Martin Luther King's beloved community.

I just started looking and searching and listening to stories and it was a very – as a poet, my research at any point, in any book is not linear or logical. It's really just very intuitive and tracking and, “Oh, I'm here and I hear a story on a plane or in an airport, or I'm on a beach, or then I read and then I find this book.” I just started gathering, just filing them away and filing them away.

Then in time, I hired someone of spirit and mind to help research what I called it dive spots, places I thought, “You know, there must be good stuff here.” I'm only one person. I can only read so many hours a day. I started to get help. Then which is always interesting in a book, the way the architecture by which I needed to gather these things was not the structure of the book that you see.

I needed to look in one way that made sense to gather and track everything, but when it actually came time to put it together, it started to present itself in a different way that was I think more accessible.

[0:06:06.3] PF: How interesting. Yeah, because it is very accessible and it's –

[0:06:10.1] MN: Oh, good.

[0:06:13.0] PF: It's so thoughtful. I mean, you're a poet, so I guess we should expect that. The thoughtfulness, that's the only word that comes to mind for, that you feel as you're reading this is so apparent.

[0:06:25.2] MN: Oh, thank you.

[0:06:26.5] PF: When did you know that it was the right time to put these stories together, to compile this and release that?

[0:06:33.6] MN: Well actually, it was – I really worked and worked and worked and then felt it was over. I wasn't – more than a decision like, “Oh, let's do it now.” John Stuart Mill the British painter and writer, he said, “You never finish a poem. You surrender it.” I think that's the same thing with books.

This book interestingly, of all my books, this book came very slowly and thickly. I'm sure some of it was because of the research. It just was different. That's why it took so long, because I would work on it for maybe two or three months and then it would beat me up and I have to put it down and go to some other books, or teach for a while and then come back to it.

It really was heavy lifting and it's the only book of all my books that in the middle I wondered, "Am I going to be able to finish this?" Every other book, I never had that question. Then I got through this confusing patch and I said, "Oh, yeah. I'll be able to see this through."

[0:07:40.3] PF: Well, I'm glad you did.

[0:07:42.1] MN: Oh, thank you.

[0:07:43.1] PF: There's so much we can learn from it. You talk about this connection that we have. I think you're right, that we do want to live that way. So many of us think, "Why can't we? Why can't we get there?" Right now, it feels more divisive than ever. We've taken steps backward here recently. How do we heal that? How do we find connections at a time when things are so divisive?

[0:08:09.1] MN: Well, of course, that's the question. Let's back up a little bit to hold that question in the historical context of humanity and of what – The one thing is that I discovered and I think just from this book, but from my other work as a spiritual seeker is that there is no permanent state of enlightenment, or arrival. There's no permanent community, so even individually or together. At least, that's not been my experience. Maybe somebody. Maybe the Dalai Lama is permanently enlightened, but in my experience on earth, I'm not saying it can't happen.

We gather the best of our moment and keep going back. Medieval monks when asked how they practice their faith said, by falling down and getting up. That's the biggest lesson I think from everything in this book is we have to get up one more time than we fall down. We have to be kind one more time than we hurt each other. We have to be safe and clear one more time than we're afraid.

All of these great stories and these inspiring examples help us for our turn. We're in the middle of a turn right now, our turn as humanity. Not just in America, but all over the globe. I think some of the things and we can talk about some of those things that separate us. One of the big ones is fear, and what that does to us if unchecked and how it leads to a whole way of life that we then build on.

Let me first start by saying, addressing I think where we are a little bit in the world today. I think that things in life, and this is a law of spiritual physics, things are always coming together and falling apart at the same time. That's naturally. Then you add to that how we inadvertently break things and that makes it even more acute.

[0:10:16.4] PF: We're like five-year-olds with this planet, aren't we?

[0:10:18.3] MN: Oh, my God. I think that we don't have an accurate sense of where this is going, because one of the out of proportion things is that we in the modern, global world I feel are addicted to the noise of things falling apart. That things when they fall apart, make a lot of noise. Things when they come together are quieter. As being addicted to that, then the chaos, the noise, the fear, the violence it's real and it's way in the foreground.

We need an extra effort to hear also the things that are coming together and all of the antidotes that are right beside us. Just for example, when I was growing up and they were very not that many TV stations, but when you had the weather report, it was called the weather report. Now it's called Storm Watch.

[0:11:17.6] PF: It follows the breaking news.

[0:11:20.4] MN: Right. Breaking news. Right. There you go. It's always in the foreground. When we look at fear and how this has played in our life, there's a chapter in there called the two tribes. I'd to talk a little bit about that for the context across history. First today in our world and say in America, I am as a person in this community, I was raised Jewish. I have a deep tie to my Jewish heritage, though religiously or spiritually, I'm a student of all paths. I had family two generations back died in the Holocaust.

All of a sudden, how am I supposed to hold that there are Nazis and white nationalists in America walking the streets of America? It's troubling to say the least, it's frightening. I know that my response as a person is that, especially given my heritage, I just know I have to be more visible. Every day I have to ask what is that, because I don't know what that means. Every day it's something different, but I know that I have to be more visible.

Now as a spirit, as a person that's just done all this research and I look back and I go, "Well, this isn't the first time in history that these chords have shown their face." As we look back across history, there have been long swells in the ocean of time, long periods of time when we've come together and long periods of time when we've pushed each other away. If we go all the way back and this gets to the two tribes, I tried to imagine, so I'm trying to imagine the first time one human being came upon another. Before that, they thought they were alone.

Imagine one at the mouth of a cave seeing another inside the cave and they go, "Oh, my God. Who are you? What are you doing here?" Then imagine the one in the cave looks at his other and says, "You're different. Go away." I think that was the beginning of the go away tribe. Based on fear, the go away tribe pushes away anything or anyone that's different. The first thing is you can't grow, unless you welcome things other than yourself.

Based on that fear when it gets strong enough, there are periods in history like now, where members of the go away tribe have said, "I can't trust you'll go away. I'm going to have to put you where I can watch you. Let me put you in a detention center, or a refugee camp, or in exile, or in a ghetto." When fear has metastasized, so that it is the God to which we pray, then we've had these horrible periods of genocide where the members of the go away tribe have said, "I can't even trust you'll be where I put you. I have to make you go away."

We go all the way back to the mouth of that cave. The other person looks in the cave and says, "Oh, you're different. Come teach me." I think that was the beginning of the come teach me tribe. Plato was part of the come teach me tribe and he said, "We're born whole, W-H-O-L-E, but we need each other to be complete." When that, that feeling of, "Oh, my God. Thank God, you're not me. Teach me what I don't know." Yeah, we are more together than alone. Let's share what we know and don't know. That's led to the highest moments of civilization, on a long moment of civilization which I talk about in a chapter is the Iberian Peninsula, that it's from 750 to 1450.

In Spain, where Muslims, Jews and Christians, they just didn't tolerate each other. They loved each other. They intermarried. They shared all their knowledge and these were incredible high points of learning and growth. The catch is that we belong to both tribes. Though I can tell you today, I am committed with my whole heart to be a part of the come teach me tribe, we could get off this interview and something will happen to me that will cause such fear in me that I'll switch tribes and then I need you to remind me that we are more together than alone.

This constant vigilance care and goodness to what I feel to lean into our true nature is what we're being called upon. What are some of the things that keep us in the go away tribe? Well, there's somewhere in the book where I quote a contemporary developmental psychologist, Robert Keegan, who teaches at Harvard. It's very helpful what he says. He defines centrism, like any egocentrism, or ethnocentrism, or nationalism, any way of thinking of being that puts us at the center above everything else. He defines that as when we mistake what is familiar as true.

[0:16:30.8] PF: Wow. That's powerful.

[0:16:32.5] MN: Isn't that? That's profound and that's very helpful. We stop looking for what's true and we mistake, "Oh, I know this. It must be true." then what's really dangerous is by definition, like that person in the cave, we react to what's not familiar as false. Now we start pushing everything away. Wow, that's really, really helpful.

What happens now, we just take it one step further then I'll pause, that if we mistake what is familiar is true, then education for the go away tribe, when we're a part of it, is confirming only what we know. That's what it means to learn is we only seek what we'll confirm what we already know. Well, that's not learning. No matter how much you know, the only way you learn is by edging and welcome into and welcome what you don't know.

[0:17:41.7] PF: That's such a good lesson for right now, because we see that occurring the way that you believe will shape which news channels you watch. I will sometimes watch channels that are different than my own opinions and my own beliefs, just to see how things are being presented. It's like two different planets. I think that what you're talking about is exactly what we're seeing going on each faction, if you want to call it that. People are finding the medium that

reinforces what they believe and where their mindset is, instead of saying opening, entertaining the thought that maybe that's not the correct news, or the correct facts.

[0:18:25.3] MN: One thing and this is very hard, because we need every effort at every level to help move this into the kindness, the long history of care that we're talking about. We need every effort. While at the same time, we need to act and legislate and protest and listen and do all these things. At another level, I really think and this is this – you can see in every age, we need to stop speaking our conclusions and asking for each other stories.

[0:19:05.2] PF: Very insightful.

[0:19:07.9] MN: Because conclusions and assumptions, we all know how cholesterol and calcification, our arteries can harden. Well, the arteries of our emotional, spiritual heart and our mind, that's what hardens our arteries of our mind and heart, our conclusions and assumptions when we stop. We need to clear out our conclusions and ask for each other's stories, because as soon as we ask for conclusions, we'll start being at odds. We may never agree about certain things.

When I can stop and say to you, “Boy, I see how strongly you feel about that. What happened in your life that you feel so strongly about that? What led you to have such a strong position?” Then we start sharing our humanity, then we start clearing out our assumptions and starting, letting the blood flow, the blood of story flow between us.

[0:20:10.4] PF: That's very our when you understand where someone's coming from. It doesn't necessarily change how you feel about their thoughts or their beliefs, but it does give a sense of compassion. It gives me a greater understanding when I say, “Okay, this is what happened to him. This is what shaped those views.” At least now I understand how they got there, even if I don't agree with where they're at.

[0:20:34.0] MN: If there's stories and sharing authentically without judgment, starts to allow us to reveal and make our bonds. Then there's room for more than one opinion. When we're afraid, there's only room for one opinion, the opinion that we think will keep us safe. If there is one insight or pattern that I could say from all the stories that I've researched through this, it would

be that when fear makes us think that self-interest will save us, or protect us. Love and suffering affirm for us that we're more together than alone.

[0:21:16.1] PF: You have something coming up that I really want our listeners to know about, because you've got some courses that you're going to offer. Because what you've given, we could talk all day and just because there's so much wisdom that you have to impart and so much guidance that you have to offer. How is it that they can tap into that?

[0:21:34.0] MN: Thank you. Starting next year, I'm going to be offering three different courses; spiritual journey. One is a week-long, one is a weekend and one is a year-long. If people go to threeintentions.com, one of my websites you'll find video introduction, you'll find links, detailed information in how you can sign up. I am blessed to be able to travel all over those groups and I also love to try to offer these extended journeys as well.

[0:22:09.2] PF: That's fantastic. We will also on our website give the visitors links, so they can get there and sign up for the courses through that as well.

[0:22:18.2] MN: Thank you.

[0:22:20.5] PF: Absolutely. Mark, I appreciate you taking time to talk with us today. Again, you have so much to share. This this book is really powerful. I cannot think of a more timely book for someone to sit down.

[0:22:30.4] MN: Oh, thank you.

[0:22:32.3] PF: Again, thank you for the imparting minutes of wisdom on us.

[0:22:35.2] MN: Oh, you're very welcome. You're very welcome. Take care and thanks so much for having me.

[0:22:40.4] PF: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:22:45.3] PF: That was Mark Nepo, talking about how we can learn to come together despite our differences and find greater understanding of those around us. You can learn more about Mark by visiting us at livehappynow.com and we'll also tell you where you can find his book, or sign up for his course.

We hope that you're already a subscriber to Live Happy Now. If you're not, you can find us on the Pandora Podcast Network, Spotify, SoundCloud, Stitcher and on iTunes and Google Play. Just look for us on your favorite platform, then hit subscribe so you'll never miss an episode.

That is all we have time for this week, so we'll meet you back here again next week for an all-new episode. Until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

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