

The Human Upgrade: Episode 1107

[00:00:00] **Dave:** You're listening to The Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey. How about we have a conversation with one of the 100 most spiritually influential living people on earth? Today's guest was named that by Watkins Mind Body Spirit, and AgeNation gave him a Life Achievement Award. He's a cancer survivor. He's written about and teaches the journey of inner transformation and the life of relationships.

[00:00:31] Author of dozens of books, including The Book of Awakening and Surviving Storms: Finding the Strength to Meet Adversity. Basically, a badass in resilience. And you might have noticed that I'm into resilience because even the naming of my last company, Bulletproof, before I left, was about that state of resilience.

[00:00:53] It wasn't about being invincible. It's about being able to handle anything that life brings your way because you have more energy. So we're going to talk about the fusion of science, health, and spirituality with a master of all of these. His name is Mark Nepo. Mark, welcome to the show.

[00:01:10] **Mark:** Thank you. Thank you so much. It's a joy to be with you.

[00:01:13] **Dave:** You just came out with a new book called Falling Down and Getting Up: Discovering Your Inner Resilience and Strength. And that's what I'm having on the show. And just for listeners, I get pitched a 100 times a week from people wanting to be on the show to talk about their books. And I've asked my producers and my team to just say no to almost everyone.

[00:01:36] Because unless the book has new knowledge and new information, there's a lot of recycled books. Oh, look, another book on intermittent fasting. You don't say. Look, that's been done. So I want new stuff you haven't heard before, or I don't want to take my time or yours on the show. So we're really stepping it up.

[00:01:54] And even though Mark's written more than a dozen books, this is one that's worth your attention. So very high standard for authors to go on the show because there's too many authors and too many of them with nothing to say. And I don't think you're one of those guys. To get our listeners tuned in on what you do, talk to me about getting cancer early in life, what happened, and what it did to your spiritual view on humans.

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[00:02:19] **Mark:** Yeah. I'm 72, and when I met people my age when I was younger, I thought they were ancient. It doesn't seem so old now. But in my early 30s, I had a rare form of lymphoma. And I hadn't been through anything really challenging up to that point, and so I was just turned inside out and upside down.

[00:02:43] And it was a rare form of lymphoma that manifested as a tumor in my skull pressing on my brain. And it grew to the size of a grapefruit, and it was pressing on a quarter of my brain inwardly. And I should have had all kinds of neurological problems, but I didn't. And I went through an incredible gauntlet of tests and biopsies, open biopsies, because no one was sure what they would find.

[00:03:18] So my karma was I was so afraid, and I had to go every through everything awake. And part of the journey resulted in a miracle that I was a few days from spinal chemotherapy and whole-head radiation. The only side effects would have been affecting my speech and memory, which for me would be knees to a quarterback, and it vanished.

[00:03:47] **Dave:** It just went away.

[00:03:48] **Mark:** It vanished. And I knew it the day that it happened. I had requested, because of an inner knowing, one more MRI before going in for these treatments. And that morning, I woke up early, and I knew it was gone because having the tumor energy wise felt like a constant vibration. And when I woke up that morning, the vibration was gone.

[00:04:19] **Dave:** Okay, inner vibration. Let's go deep on that. There's something called interoception. There's actually two flavors of interoception. There's enteroception, which is gut-based, and then there's interoception, which is all the stuff in your body. And most of us don't have much awareness of that other than I had a gut feeling, or I have a stomach ache, or my heart is pounding.

[00:04:42] But there's many, many different layers of that. And as you gain attainment in meditation, or biofeedback practices, you start realizing, oh, there's other signals and all that noise. But most people don't feel a vibrating around their tumors. Even medical intuitives who can feel their own tumors, they've never described it that way. How did you learn how to feel your tumor?

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[00:05:05] **Mark:** I don't really know. One of the things that happened in that journey was, of course, being-- I was a young poet. I was teaching at Albany University. And at that point, I was hoping, like any young poet, maybe if I worked hard enough, maybe I'd write one or two great poems in my life and contribute to something.

[00:05:29] Forget all that, when I was thrown into this cancer journey, I suddenly needed to discover true poems that would help me live. And so I thought I was open, but I was forced more open. And so through this journey-- because the second part of the story is I was spit back into life, like spit out of the mouth of the whale of cancer, like Jonah.

[00:05:54] But 10 months later, this tumor was so dramatic that I had a sister tumor on a rib in my back that no one noticed. I didn't even notice that I had access to all the films. And so 10 months later, I was back in needing to have a rib removed this time, surgically from my back.

[00:06:14] And then I had to go through very aggressive chemo, which almost killed me. And then I had to stop that. And so I discovered that miracle is a process and not an event. And the humbling thing is that I'm Jewish. I was raised Jewish. I have a deep tie to the Jewish heritage, but I'm a student of all paths because, this whole journey, I was blessed to have support, and help, and blessing from people of all walks of life, formal and informal, from scientists to Native Americans to Sufis to people I didn't know.

[00:06:51] So when I woke up on the other side, I was not and am still not wise enough to know what worked and what didn't, and I was challenged to believe in everything. And all my work, my books, my teaching, I believe in the center of all traditions, the unique gifts of each. And it's the cancer survivor in me that says, okay, how do we make use of it? If we can't make use of it, what good is it?

[00:07:21] **Dave:** I'm still wondering if they made a woman out of your rib.

[00:07:25] **Mark:** Ah, I don't know. Maybe I was turned into that feminine quality, that receptive quality, which has deepened my whole journey as a poet.

[00:07:38] **Dave:** Obviously, if you're listening, where did that come from, the whole taking a rib from Adam to make Eve or whatever? One of the Bible things. And I say that jokingly, but that is

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a powerful metaphor. And when you're dealing with metaphysical stuff, you always step back and say, huh, what's going on there?

[00:07:57] I've had a few cancer survivors on the show. One of my dear friends, Mike Koenigs, wrote a book called Cancerpreneur about how he almost died from bowel cancer and how it really changes outlook on life. But he did this as a father a little bit later in life. You're 72, but this happened to you 40 years ago.

[00:08:15] **Mark:** Yeah.

[00:08:15] **Dave:** So it was a very early, call it, awakening. You're already a poet. Were you one of those artistic kids who went for walks in the forest and journal? Were you always artsy healer?

[00:08:28] **Mark:** I was always very open-hearted and sensitive. I was born in Brooklyn, grew up on Long Island. I didn't get access to nature till later on in life. And for me, the world spoke to me through metaphor as a kid, even though I didn't know what that meant. And that had been my language, but it was, in high school, the first woman I fell in love with dumped me and broke my heart, which is archetypal.

[00:09:00] **Dave:** Yeah, they always do

[00:09:03] **Mark:** I wasn't a loner, but I didn't have any real close friends till I got to college. So I started writing to heal. And I realized pretty quickly, I wasn't talking to myself. I had begun a conversation with life. And this brings, to me, the sense that poetry is not the arrangement of words on a page. It's the unexpected utterance of the soul.

[00:09:28] And you don't even have to write it down. I just happened to write it down. Everyone has a poet in their heart, and it's the conduit by which I think we come fully alive and enliven our connections to the web of connection that is the living universe.

[00:09:49] **Dave:** Do you think that you healed yourself? Do you think God healed you? How does that work?

[00:09:55] **Mark:** I think the closest thing that I could come to is I don't think I healed myself. I think I contributed by being desperately open and wanting to live. There's the early Chinese Taoist sense of things. And the great metaphor for that is even the Tao means the way. They don't even try to name it. But a metaphor for that is that life in the Taoist sense is an invisible river,

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and each soul is a fish in that river. And so when the fish align, find the current, the current takes them.

[00:10:34] And this has informed really all of my work, is that I've come to believe, and I've experienced, I think, that when I can be authentic and be fully here, that's the best chance to align with the currents of life. And those currents are restorative and healing. So I think I contributed by being scared out of my wits and wanting to be here.

[00:11:07] **Dave:** Enlightened self-interest also motivated the creation of the biohacking movement. Like, this body is not going to make it if I don't do something about it. So there's that. And it can be motivating and expanding, for sure. One of the things that I stumbled into early in life, also out of desperation, is I learned longevity from people in their 80s when I was in my 20s.

[00:11:32] Because the stuff they were doing to stay young was the stuff that was helping me lose the 100 pounds, helping me reverse chronic fatigue, not have brain fog the way you're supposed to in your 70s if you don't manage your biology. And so I just stumbled into this. Oh my god-- I'm going to be crass-- these old people know a lot of stuff.

[00:11:50] And when you're in your 20s, you think you know everything. So I've cultivated a practice of always spending time with people older than me and younger than me whenever I can. In fact, this weekend I was at my friend T. Lock's 80th birthday in Las Vegas because you don't know that many people who are 80 who can do cool meditative things.

[00:12:11] And as you've aged, though, most of my older friends have described to me at some time in their 50s or 60s where they feel like they became less visible. People in their 20s or 30s, say, ah, it's an old person. What do they know? Did you experience that? At what time in life did you, oh, wait, I'm not as visible as I was before? And what did that do to you?

[00:12:36] **Mark:** Oh, I haven't really experienced that personally. I feel like one of the things about being a poet or an artist of any kind or someone who's-- And I agree with you that I've had both models, if you will, of elders that I feel like that everything to this point in life, even though I've been blessed to retrieve-- I like to say retrieve all these books-- it's just been an apprenticeship for I don't know what yet.

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[00:13:07] I feel like I'm just beginning in a lot of ways, and I've had the typical older person earlier in life. I had very kind people, but people who never asked a question. And then I had some mentors unexpected-- most mentors are unexpected-- elders who, my God, I just was so enlivened by their unending inquiry.

[00:13:38] That was medicine. That brought them alive. And I think one of the reasons I've been able to retrieve so many books is that I learned how to get out of the way. And I've come to think of writing now as listening and taking notes.

[00:13:54] **Dave:** You used the word elder three times there, and it's such a beautiful word. In fact, Chip Conley came on, putting together the Modern Elder Program to introduce elders. And I went to a dinner that he put together where we had people in their 20s, people in midlife, and people who are in their 70s and 80s to all sit down and have dinner.

[00:14:13] It was really cool. And you just realize the village elder component is missing, and one of my goals with this show and with the biohacking movement in general is like, if you want to save a lot of time, ask an old person, because they probably already did it. So let's capture that wisdom and knowledge and make it accessible because there are many like you who are over 70.

[00:14:35] I've got plenty of mileage. You're like, I'm ready to share. And now you know something, which is why your new book is noteworthy. But there's a couple of questions. You also said you like to say your books are downloaded, did you say?

[00:14:49] **Mark:** Retrieve.

[00:14:50] **Dave:** Retrieved. Right. So are we talking Akashic records? Where are you retrieving them from?

[00:14:56] **Mark:** Again, let's use that image of, and it's from this principle that if I participate. But it's a journey of relationship, not of me creating something out of nothing. I think that's part of the modern narcissism, of the modern world. Oh, I'm an artist.

[00:15:14] I'll be a miniature god. I say it comes into being. No, that's not what my experience has been. But again, when I am authentic, in a small way, if I follow a feeling, a confusion, a pain, a fear, a question, if I'm open and honest enough, I am usually rewarded with an insight. I'm rewarded with a story, a truth, a poem, a metaphor, and then that becomes my teacher.

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[00:15:48] So in a lot of ways, my heart is my Geiger counter. It's like I know what's true, and then my mind needs to be a student of what I discovered is true. And if I dismissed it because I didn't yet understand it, I would have written nothing.

[00:16:05] **Dave:** I get you. So it's a dance between you and whatever else is around you, but it's not like you're plugging in and retrieving from somewhere.

[00:16:17] And I think this is the dance with the unknown. I think one of the things about our modern age right now and our contemporary scene is, as people get insulated with their fear, then we tend to only seek what will confirm what we already know, and that's not learning. Whatever we know, however little or a lot, there's always an edge. And in so many ways, that edge is just to keep deepening our relationship with the unknown.

[00:16:51] Do you believe in evil?

[00:16:52] **Mark:** I'll describe evil this way. First off, let's back up. I think the Buddhists talk about the friction of the wheel of life. There is the weight and gravity of living, which causes suffering, which no one can get out of, just like they can't escape gravity.

[00:17:14] And then there's the way that we inadvertently hurt each other. I'm bringing you tea, and I trip, and I spill it on you, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. To me, evil is consciously, deliberately doing harm, knowing you're doing harm. I think that's evil.

[00:17:35] **Dave:** And do you think it exists?

[00:17:37] **Mark:** It exists, and I think this is one of the endless conversations that's been since the beginning of time, is, are human beings innately good, or are they innately bad? And if they're bad, then we need all these controls, and things, and restraints. I'm of the camp that we are innately, I won't even say good, but whole. And then being human, things block us.

[00:18:04] **Dave:** Yeah.

[00:18:04] **Mark:** Things veil us. It's interesting. In the Chinese language, when they go to translate the English word sin, they translate it as opaque.

[00:18:15] **Dave:** Hmm.

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[00:18:20] **Mark:** And also, in the Chinese tradition, there was a philosopher, Mencius. I would have loved to have interviewed this guy. He was 300 BC, and from all we can tell, he was just a sweetheart.

[00:18:31] **Dave:** Total mensch.

[00:18:33] **Mark:** Yeah, total mensch. And he said, water, allowed its own nature, will always flow downhill and join other water. It can be manipulated to go uphill even, but allowed its true nature, it will always flow and join other water. And so two people. Human beings, allowed their true nature, will flow to each other, and join, and be kind.

[00:18:59] But we can be manipulated or manipulate ourselves to be hesitant or unkind, or to work out of fear needlessly. And so, yeah, my experience has been, the times that I trip into inadvertently hurting those I love is when I'm opaque, when I'm blocked, when I'm not clear, when I have forgotten what matters, or who I am, or who you are.

[00:19:31] **Dave:** It's interesting. One of my favorite courses in my undergrad was called Religion and Violence, and it was taught by a rabbinical scholar, and we were studying Jim Jones, and all sorts of different violent religious movements around the world to figure out the relationship between them.

[00:19:50] And I'm a computer science guy. Just full transparency, I took the religious classes because you can get an A in a religious class a lot more easily than a computer programming class, let me just say. There is no right answer versus either your code works or doesn't, so maybe that's a comment on my technical skills.

[00:20:09] But it was really enlightening because I believe that all these people were basically irrational. And I told the teacher that, and he laughed and said, no, no, they're totally rational. They just have very different beliefs than you. So if you believe you're going to heaven with a 100 virgins or whatever the story is, okay, maybe it makes sense to put on some explosive clothing or whatever, but it's not an irrational act.

[00:20:34] It's just maybe one that's not connected to the reality that the rest of us are seeing. So it's that lack of transparency, that opaqueness, and that you've been programmed with a reality

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that isn't a very functional version of it. And that was really a life changing understanding for me where I didn't think everyone was stupid and irrational. I just thought they were poorly informed.

[00:20:57] **Mark:** Yeah, yeah. I think that so many times, we've heard this archetypal choice between love and fear, and it comes down in every direction and every way. I I've learned through, especially for my cancer journey, feeling so much fear, that fear is something to be moved through, not obey. If I'm afraid and I ask my fear, what should I do? My fear will go, oh, I thought you'd never ask. Be more afraid.

[00:21:30] **Dave:** Yeah. Maybe you should be more afraid. It's hard to know. You also said something about, are people good or evil? And that's a very dualistic approach. And the non-dual, they're good and evil at the same time, depending on which life, or emanation, or situation you're in. And to accept that, that's okay.

[00:21:52] It feels like most things can be put to misuse. You can use the shovel to dig a hole. You can use it to smack someone. Is the shovel good or evil? I don't know. I feel like it's variable, and it depends on the circumstances, but that also leads to a life with no meaning, and you're studying a life of meaning. So do you have to have duality in order to have meaning in your life?

[00:22:15] **Mark:** No, no. And in fact, I'm glad you brought that up because in referring to that, I, in no way, was intending that people are all good or all evil. We have capacities to do harm and o do well, and we all have a mix, I think. Just like there are X and Y chromosomes, and there's infinite combinations, we have an infinite capacity for how we behave and how we work in the world.

[00:22:41] And I think the deeper meanings of life, at least for me, the greatest teachers have always come through paradox, where more than one thing is true at the same time. And I think that tripping into duality only is a big cause of a lot of suffering in our world.

[00:22:59] **Dave:** Wow, so cool. A big cause of my suffering was the belief that I was a rational actor. And it was only when I realized I was simultaneously a rational and an irrational actor at the same time that I got a lot more peace. And I'm like, what? How can that be? It depends on your framing, and it depends on which part of you you're talking about.

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[00:23:23] Your body will do things that are irrational to your mind, but they're rational from the body's perspective of reality, which is relatively ignorant and fast. For instance, it's irrational to startle at something that's not dangerous, except it was rational if you didn't know what it was and you were responsible for keeping the body alive. There's all sorts of stuff, and you take credit for it. I just don't have to worry about it. Is that similar to the way you're looking at things? What do you know that I don't about that?

[00:23:54] **Mark:** I think what I've come to know about fear and pain, fear always gets its power from not looking. As human beings, we tend to inflate or deflate what's before us and our experience. And I learned this very deeply at a very transformative moment in my cancer journey.

[00:24:18] I had that rib removed from my back, and three weeks later, I was ushered into a really aggressive form of chemo. And the first treatment was in New York City, and it was horribly botched. So I was in a holiday inn with my former wife and a dear old friend, and the only medicine they gave me was oral, so I couldn't keep it down.

[00:24:42] And I started to get sick every 20 minutes, and this is with the stitches still in my back from a rib being removed. And so, eventually, we went to the emergency room, but just before dawn came, I was slumped in the corner of this room because I was exhausted, not to any wisdom on my part.

[00:25:06] It started to occur to me, somewhere nearby, a baby's being born. Somewhere nearby, a couple's making love for the first time. Somewhere nearby, an adult father and a son who haven't spoken for years are sitting and having coffee. And then I realized, to be broken is no reason to see all things as broken.

[00:25:29] And what I've learned from that moment, which I've had to reflect on for years, is that while I'm afraid, I need the company of those who know what it is to be afraid, but I need everything safe and whole to heal. And when I'm broken, I need the company of those who know what it's like to be broken, but I need everything intact and different than me to heal.

[00:25:56] And I think we have a lot of rightful emphasis on diversity, which, in our modern society, of course, is referring to ethnic diversity. But I think the greatest diversity is in the mysterious universe and variations of life force. So thank God everything-- and being human,

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when I'm broken, I want to extrapolate and make the world a broken place. And when I'm afraid, I want to extrapolate and make the world a fearful place.

[00:26:27] Thank God it's not. Normally, it's natural enough as humans. So if I realize that diversity, then I'll say, oh, well, what I'm going through is insignificant. No, it's real. And if I extrapolate everything, this is happening to me, so this is the most important thing. No. And thank God, there is other life than what I'm going through.

[00:26:57] **Dave:** It sounds like spiritual diversity-- not religious diversity, but spiritual diversity.

[00:27:02] **Mark:** Absolutely.

[00:27:03] **Dave:** I have found that for me to heal some physical stuff, but certainly the emotional traumas, PTSD, the deep stuff like that, you need to be around at least one and sometimes several, we'll call master-level healers.

[00:27:15] They're people who know how to sit there, what you would call holding space in some traditions. And just by being in their presence when they're calm and you're losing your shit, your body, without any conscious mind at all, just realizes it doesn't have to be that way. And then a shift happens.

[00:27:32] And those are things that pharmaceutical companies hate because you can't clinical trial that stuff, and the healer is an important part of an equation. There's a patient with a symptom, there's a technology or a drug, and then there's a healer. And they don't like it that the healer has an effect. But my experience has been that. Do you agree with that model, that we're resonating with the teachers who are creating the temporary sense of calm so you can adjust yourself?

[00:27:58] **Mark:** Yes, yes. Two stories that come to mind. One, I had a dear friend who's now gone, but another friend who helped me when I was going through cancer. And later on, about 20 years ago, he had cancer and died. And I went through this very open-- and he was there for me with other loved ones.

[00:28:20] But when it was his turn, I discovered that wasn't how he wanted to go through it. And I loved him even more because I thought that being open about it and keeping me company was natural for him. And it was even more loving because it wasn't. He was very private. He

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didn't want to talk about it. And so I spent a lot of time sitting next to him in the hospital. And Dave, I would purposely breathe slow next to him.

[00:28:50] **Dave:** Yeah.

[00:28:51] **Mark:** And eventually, his breath matched mine, and that was the only way I could give to him. That was the only way. Yeah, it was a beautiful thing. And the other story, which is not a story about my life, but I had been doing research for one of my books, and it led me back to about healers and shamans.

[00:29:12] And I found this common story, different variations, but it was in a lot of different indigenous traditions. And the story is this, that there's a shaman in a village, and he notices that a young boy has the gift, has the healing touch. So he goes to his parents and says, would you let me train him?

[00:29:32] And they say, oh, we'd be honored. So he starts training. He's eight, nine years old. First thing that the shaman says to him is, you're going to want to heal someone. Don't do it till I tell you you're ready. So, of course, a little boy sees an old woman who's suffering, and he lays hands on her, and sure enough, he pulls the illness out of her, and then he gets sick.

[00:29:59] And so the shaman is called, and the shaman heals him. He had a fever. And then as soon as he comes to, the shaman's over him saying, what did I tell you? And then he proceeds to tell him there are twin calls to healing. The first is being able to draw the illness, whether it's physical, emotional, spiritual, mental out of the person.

[00:30:23] But the second is just as important. How do you discharge it so that you don't get sick and you just don't become an instrument of contagion? What good is it if I take it from you and give it to my wife after we're off this interview? And it's amazing, that ancient common story.

[00:30:43] Whether you're a professional healer or you're just in a relationship with a loved one or a friend, that's so important. We have a lot more medical tools, but it's the same thing. How do we address those twin calls of healing?

[00:30:58] **Dave:** It's really cool that you're saying that. I'm talking with John Gray, the Mars and Venus friend, a little bit later today, and he told me a story, privately, how he used to do a lot of

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healing work and then quit doing it because it was so much work for him to, basically, clean off all the stuff he would pick up doing that. It was just taking too much time every day for it.

[00:31:20] I was just in the Middle East, and I met a guy who was like, I just learned how to heal people, and I can just do it. And I looked at him and said, do you have any training in this? And he goes, no, I just know how to do it. And I said, all right, let's talk a little bit.

[00:31:40] And he said, yeah, I haven't slept in six days. And I said, yeah, I can tell. It's written all over you. So we sat down at a bar, actually, and I showed him some grounding techniques, and I was like, you need to find a teacher if you're going to do this because it's not safe to just do this work on someone unless you know the basic techniques.

[00:32:03] And even then, you might think you're a good healer, but you're actually probably not. And then you're going to come across someone who's got something really sticky, and it's going to be all over you. And if you don't have the masters and the teachers who know how to get that off of you, this is work.

[00:32:20] This is the stuff that a lot of people don't talk about, but it is out there. And I've worked with this stuff. I've seen it plenty of times, and I'm blessed to have been taught by some people where I don't do a lot of healing work on people, but I can when I'm called to. And I know enough to be humble about the fact that I'm going to call someone to help me ditch it if I need to.

[00:32:41] And I know the practices. And I wish there was more conversation like the story you just shared. And thank you for sharing it because it's really important, especially if you're listening to this and you're saying, I just realized I can do this. Cool. Find a teacher. How did you find a teacher?

[00:32:58] **Mark:** Oh, like I said, our mentors and teachers, despite who we look for, the teachers come by accident. One teacher was wonderful. He's now gone. Joel Elkes was a holocaust survivor, a water colorist, and a medical doctor, who was one of the founders of psychopharmacology.

[00:33:29] He was part of the team in the early '50s in England that discovered forsythia. He lived to be 102. I met him when he was 80 and wondered how much time we'd have. We had 22 years, and he was an incredible mentor to me. And he taught me how to be a teacher, and one of

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the moments was, when I met him when he was 80, talking about elders, and this is before we had our digital cell phones.

[00:34:00] I had a tape recorder. I went to where he was living, and I put the tape recorder. We were going to have tea. And he said, what's that? I said, Joel, it's a tape recorder. He said, why? I said, I want to record your stories. Why? Because you're an elder. He said, elder, shmelder, turn that thing off.

[00:34:22] I said, oh, okay, okay. And then we sat in silence for a while, and we had tea. And then he reached over and took my hand and said, now tell me about you. Tell me what you care about. And I knew in that moment how to be a teacher.

[00:34:40] **Dave:** Wow. That's profound. And the way you connected with him at first, he reached out to you?

[00:34:49] **Mark:** I reached out to him. I heard him speak, and then I just-- he was born in Lithuania, but he grew up in England because his father, sensing the Holocaust, sent him to London. And so he was Jewish and had an English accent. So for a young Jewish artist, this was like Laurence Olivier and Moses. How could I not fall in love with him?

[00:35:16] **Dave:** Got it. He just stood out to you. And this is a shamanic teaching, but when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. Or maybe that's from some kind of Chinese proverb, but wherever it is, I've noticed that in my own life and in of many others, where they just show up. And I'm really grateful sometimes someone just pops into my life who really has exactly what I needed. They know somehow. And that's helped me a lot.

[00:35:45] And for listeners, if you're trying-- how do I know? I don't know. How do you know when your foot hurts? You just know. And if someone tells you to read a book, three different people tell you to read the same book or that you need to meet the same person, you probably should listen.

[00:35:57] I've met some of the people who taught me things because different people just keep saying I should talk to this guy. They don't know why they're saying it. I don't know why they're saying it. The world works that way. So you should listen.

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[00:36:08] **Mark:** I think that you had said earlier in our conversation that so much in our modern world, in our disposable society, we tend to dispose elders. We just see them as old and every culture, before the modern world, has valued elders. And I think that's one of the great questions we can ask anyone who's been around a while, is, what do you see?

[00:36:31] After all of your journey, what do you know? I think everyone, not just elders, but those who suffer have a wisdom the rest of us need. And since everyone suffers, we all take turns being teachers. One of my small poems that's been a teacher for me, just three lines, is, those who wake are the students. Those who stay awake are the teachers. How we take turns.

[00:36:59] **Dave:** Beautiful. And it always is A circuit that's set up, so it's not like our elders don't benefit from spending time with younger people as well. I do this when I'm putting together my camps at Burning Man. You always want to have a few elders, and you want to have a few people in their early 20s.

[00:37:18] And then a mix in between. And the reason you do that is you get the energy of youth from the young ones, and you get the wisdom of elders. And if you're lucky, you have an elder with the energy of youth, which is what I'm working to build with the whole longevity work I'm doing. Then it just gets to be a lot more fun. Let's talk about your new book. And I think by now, listeners have got a sense for you being an elder who's got some wisdom accumulated.

[00:37:45] Your book is called Falling Down and Getting Up, and it's about resilience and strength. One of the things I've noticed is my teens or 20s, the thought of failure was abhorrent, and I spent a lot of my early career burning myself out and being stupidly successful but running away from failure, which is a super toxic way of living and leads you to have blind spots. And it's actually narcissistic at its worst expression.

[00:38:17] If that's the way a lot of people are living today, it feels like it's even worse because the idea that you could be triggered by being told that you failed so that no one can tell you you failed, and this whole fragile I have to have a gold star or I can't survive mindset-- how does Falling Down and Getting Up resonate with someone who never has had experience of falling down because they got a participation trophy?

[00:38:41] **Mark:** Yeah, so let's back up a second, and I'll move into that, by just noting, I think that in the modern world, it's always been, but more acutely in the modern world, our definition

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of success and failure isn't very helpful. In a narcissistic culture, we tend to define success as getting what we want and failure as not getting what we want.

[00:39:05] That's actually a pretty infantile way of looking at success and failure because if I got most of the things I wanted, I might be dead by now. Not everything I want is what I need. I don't always know best. That's why experience is a great teacher. And so I think that often, my experience has been there's nothing wrong with working for what we want. I don't want my wife to die. I want her to live a long time. That's different than I want a Mercedes.

[00:39:41] Often, working for what I want in my life has turned out to be an apprenticeship for working with what I'm given, which is where our gifts truly show up. So it's fine to work for what we want, but often we don't get what we want, or we have dreams, and the dreams don't always come true.

[00:40:02] And I wouldn't say that's a failure. I've come to think of dreams as kindling for the fire of aliveness. And therefore, I can give my all to working for my dreams, and even if they don't come true, sometimes I come true, and that's more important. So now, with that in mind, falling down and getting up, we create a lot of suffering by resisting legitimate suffering. Carl Jung said, neurosis is a substitute for legitimate suffering.

[00:40:42] **Dave:** Really? I love that quote.

[00:40:43] **Mark:** Yeah, isn't that something? And so we can spend so much energy trying to avoid falling, but falling down or going in a different direction than we intended, which is just a change of course, you can't escape it, being human. It's like we can't escape gravity when we walk out of the house.

[00:41:07] No one signs up to fall down. Oh, give me two. No. But it's inevitable. It's part of life. And we grow and learn from it. So if we back up enough, falling down over a lifetime is actually a dance. And the question is, what's your particular individual dance look like, and how can you do it better? How can you be skilled at it? And what can you keep learning from it?

[00:41:34] So the title of the book came from medieval monks in Europe when asked how they practiced their faith, said, by falling down and getting up. And I get that. I resonate with that.

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And then what that made me think, as we start to look at other cultures-- all cultures speak about this in some way.

[00:41:51] I then discovered that in Japan, there's a proverb that says, fall down seven, get up eight. Fall down seven, get up eight. And then I discovered in the Hindu tradition, the Upanishads-- folks who aren't familiar, there are the holy anonymous texts in the Hindu tradition filled with amazing metaphors.

[00:42:13] And one of them is of a caterpillar. And if you watch how a caterpillar moves, it stretches forward, and then it bunches up, actually goes back a little, and then goes forward. So it's bunching up and going-- this is another form of falling down and getting up, going backwards and going forward.

[00:42:36] **Dave:** Mm.

[00:42:37] **Mark:** And that reminded me finally of, during my cancer journey, when I had that rib removed, I woke up right after the surgery, in a room, of course, and there was this nurse hovering over me, and she says to me, get up. We're going to walk. And I said, who's going to walk? Now? And then she got softer, and she whispered to me, two steps forward, one step back.

[00:43:05] All of these things, from all different approaches, the caterpillar, two steps-- what I meant to say is that in the Upanishads, that caterpillar image, they say, this is the rhythm of spiritual growth, like a caterpillar. And so all of these rhythms come together. And so there is an art to falling and an art to getting up that is very personal to how we face what is ours to face and how we ask for help when we need help. And those become ingredients for resilience.

[00:43:48] **Dave:** There's a profound book called The Heart of the World about exploring the deepest gorge on the planet in the Himalayas, where only a couple of explorers have ever gone. And it's allegedly where Shangri-La lives. And I've done some exploring the Himalayas-- nothing as extreme as that. But the book just resonated in a really deep way with me.

[00:44:12] And there's a story in it where the explorer, a Westerner, they're falling down, I think, in mangroves or whatever kind of plants are growing up there, the big ones that trip you. Fallen over them and gotten bit by leeches, but I forget their name. And he falls down, and he's just swearing, and he's pissed.

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[00:44:32] And he's walking with a local monk. And then the monk falls over and gets all muddy, and just stands up, starts laughing and laughing and laughing. They both fell for the same thing, but the results were so different about it. How would we learn how to laugh when we fall down and just be curious? I guess I'll do that one again.

[00:44:50] **Mark:** I think being human, if it's not too painful, we can laugh. And of course, this brings up what I call faith in life. Not faith in a tradition, or a person, or a doctrine, but faith in life that it might be hard to be grateful for something while I'm in it. But more often than not, I'm grateful because I know I will learn something from it once I'm out of that difficult passage.

[00:45:23] And I think this is at the heart of the Leonard Cohen's great song, Hallelujah. And he talks in there about the broken Hallelujah. I didn't talk to Leonard Cohen, but this is what it says to me. Here's an image. If you're on a raft at sea and a wave comes and crashes the raft, and you're hanging to a piece of driftwood, that's pretty difficult for you and me. That's even tragic.

[00:45:51] And it doesn't diminish the majesty of the sea. And how do we honor both? Miracle and tragedy are in every moment. And the value of falling down is that we're grounded. But the value of miracle is that we're uplifted. So if we only are grounded, we can be ground down. And if we're only uplifted, we're going to transcend out of here.

[00:46:29] And so somehow, one of the challenges in being human is how to allow the lift of miracle and the grounding of falling to help us be fully here, neither leaving this earth and neither being ground to dust on it. And the wheel of life never stops turning. And if we stop it at any one point, we have a philosophy.

[00:46:58] If you stop it on the top, oh, we're going to transcend out of here. Isn't everything wonderful? And if you stop it at the bottom, now we have nihilism and existentialism and everything sucks. That whole thing of the glass-- is it half full or half empty? It's always both. It's always both.

[00:47:22] **Dave:** This back to the non-dualism thing, right?

[00:47:26] **Mark:** Yeah.

[00:47:28] **Dave:** You talk about deeper teachers in your book, fear, pain, grief. How do you recommend that people deal with those?

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[00:47:41] **Mark:** And again, what I should have said at the beginning of our interview is that what I offer are examples, not instructions. We're just comparing notes. I think fear and pain are one thing. As I mentioned earlier, at least my experience, fear really gets its power from not looking. So the courage to look at what we're afraid of till it's right size.

[00:48:08] And if I can't do that alone, that means I got to call you up and say, I need to look at this, but I'm really stuck. Can you come over and help? Hippocrates said pleasure is the absence of pain. And that's very helpful, especially in periods of chronic pain, because even in chronic pain, there's always a sesura, even if it's brief, there's a moment. And how do we somehow find resilience in those pauses, the absence of pain, even if it's for a second?

[00:48:46] And then we'll get to grief, but there's an ancient Hindu teaching story about pain. And there's a master and apprentice always. And the truth is that this master, finds this apprentice really annoying because all he does is complain, complain, complain. So the master says to the apprentice, get a handful of salt, put it in a glass of water, and bring it to me quietly. So he does. And then the master says, drink. He drinks from the glass, and spits it out.

[00:49:22] Master says, what's the matter? He says, it's bitter. Master says, get the same exact amount of salt and follow me quietly. So as it cupped in his hands, he follows him. The master leads him to a river. And he says, put the salt in the river. He says, now drink. He kneels down. He scoops it. It dribbles down his chin. And the master said, well? He says, oh, it's fresh. The master looks at him. He says, stop being a glass. Become a lake.

[00:49:49] **Dave:** Mm.

[00:49:50] **Mark:** Stop being a glass. Become a lake. And I think that ancient Hindu teaching story, anonymous-- I love these anonymous ancient stories because before schools, and certificates, and degrees, stories carried wisdom. But I think the power of that story is that everyone gets their handful of salt.

[00:50:12] No one gets out of this life without a handful of salt. So when we do experience pain, the only thing we can do is to enlarge our sense of things, become a lake. Not to eliminate it, but to right size it. And if we don't, not only will the pain be more acute, but will get bitter.

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[00:50:37] And so the question out of that, which is so powerful for me, and I share it in my teaching, is, what relationships, experiences, and practices are in your toolbox so that you can enlarge your sense of things the next time pain surprises you? Or fear. What do you do? What can you do so that you don't have to reinvent the wheel every time you're surprised by fear and pain? And then we have to personalize that toolbox.

[00:51:12] **Dave:** It's funny. I've been working with my teenagers on this. If that happens, it'll go on my permanent record. It'll be there forever. I'm like, do you know how many of my employees I've checked their permanent record? There's no such thing as a permanent record.

[00:51:28] And of course, when I was a teenager, I believe the same thing. And then when it comes to friends who are getting separated or divorced-- I've been divorced-- it feels like you're going to die then. But if you look back, listeners, where were you two years ago? Completely different. And two years before that, completely different. And five years ago, you had no idea what you were going to be doing now.

[00:51:52] And so with the right time frame, the pain just feels, oh, this is a very temporary thing, even though it feels so big. And that reminder, to myself, I feel like that's wisdom that comes with time. How do we transmit that wisdom to people who haven't figured it out yet?

[00:52:11] **Mark:** This raises a paradox for me. And that is, I'm a lifelong, devoted teacher, and I've come to believe that you really can't change anyone. So what am I doing?

[00:52:23] **Dave:** Oh, I don't want to change them. I just want to show them the--

[00:52:25] **Mark:** No, no, no. I know. But what it's led me to is I think that what it changes, what it means to be a teacher for me, which is to be more like a greenhouse, is to provide light and warmth to anyone before us so that they will grow at their own pace in their own direction, not where I think they should grow, not how I think they should grow, but providing the warmth and light so that they can organically grow themselves.

[00:52:59] And I think that, strangely, things take exactly the time they take. I feel like every person has their own language of wisdom, and every experience decodes a word in that language. The question that I've started to ask-- I don't have kids, but young people around me, through my teaching-- I'm in an uncle position, godfather position with a lot of younger people. I

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find myself sitting with them and saying, what's it like to be you? Tell me. What's it like to be you? And how do you relate to the things around you?

[00:53:39] **Dave:** So you're creating the observer's mind in them so that they'll step out and examine instead of being in it all the time.

[00:53:47] **Mark:** So to invite folks, young or at any age, to the work of self-awareness, again, I think, is relational. I have a friend who's worked for years in the CDC. David Addis. He's an amazing doctor who has been very instrumental in curbing worm-based diseases, especially elephantiasis, but he was working in Brazil, and he stumbled on this indigenous practice. It's in Portuguese. So the word in Portuguese, it's called edai, E-D-A-I, and it means, and so.

[00:54:26] And the way it works, say that I have a problem and I come to you. And so the way it would work is I'd explain what's going on, and you would listen, and you would say, edai, and so. And the first edai means and so. In the context of all life, what does this mean? Not minimizing, but truly, that's enlargening our sense of things.

[00:54:56] And then I would express to you whatever that means to me, and then you would listen and say, edai, and so. Given where you are, where's the next piece of solid ground? And then I would try to explain that as best I understand it. And then the final edai would be, and so what is your next step? Isn't that a remarkable indigenous practice?

[00:55:25] **Dave:** It's like an acceptance practice. I like that. I've seen something similar in an ancient Chinese practice, which is, yeah, and so? And then what? I like that a lot. You talk about something else in the chapter. It's funny. You just mentioned your friend at the CDC, and you have a chapter in the book that says, speak what we know to be true.

[00:55:52] Now, it feels like your friend was working on a real disease that we actually know how to cure and things like that, where the cure might not be worse than the disease. But a lot of people who spoke what they know to be true and what, especially now, we know to be true, over the past few years, experienced an outsized amount of pain, and grief, and suffering. Now, how would we apply your learnings to people who are facing censorship?

[00:56:21] **Mark:** Every generation has had to face this. Even think of Galileo, who was forced to recant when all he realized was that the Earth wasn't the center of the solar system. He was put

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under house arrest for the last eight years of his life. And interestingly, this is absolutely ridiculous, but true. In 2014, 359 years later, after a commission, Pope John Paul II said, oops, we're sorry. Galileo was right.

[00:56:59] **Dave:** You don't think.

[00:57:01] **Mark:** I think that this raises a paradox or a way of being that all human beings face, and that is-- I think about it this way, between the friction of being visible and the cost of being invisible. That if we are visible-- and that's different from, look at me. I'm not saying getting attention. I'm just saying, just not vanishing, being visible.

[00:57:31] Then, by definition, we cannot possibly meet the expectations of everyone we meet. So there will be misunderstanding, conflict, some friction of some kind, the friction of being who we are in the world. And I do think part of our journey is to be who we are everywhere.

[00:57:53] So the other side is the cost of being invisible, of being hidden, or being a people pleaser, or just being a chameleon. To me, when I've stumbled into that in my life, it's corrosive. That is, if I'm silent too long, I lose my voice. If I'm hidden too long, I start to vanish. If I play dumb, I become dumb. And so the challenge, I think always, is to try to be who we are everywhere.

[00:58:35] And of course, that doesn't mean that every place I go, every person I meet in Starbucks, I have to proclaim what I know. It means that I have to be what I know. And D. H. Lawrence has a poem called Self-Protection in which he asks the question, is the best self-protection being who we are or hiding who we are?

[00:59:00] **Dave:** What do you think? What's your answer?

[00:59:02] **Mark:** Oh, being who we are, absolutely.

[00:59:04] **Dave:** You think?

[00:59:04] **Mark:** Which doesn't mean that there aren't some times that I need to be still and quiet. It doesn't mean I have to announce who I am. There's a difference. Yeah.

[00:59:21] **Dave:** I did this course a while ago called Urban Escape and Evasion. And they teach you how to know if you're being followed, how to escape from kidnappers, and pick locks, and

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how to move through a city with bounty hunters hunting you. That's actually the final exam. It was really scary. It was also really fun, but they taught a state called the gray man.

[00:59:44] And it's actually also taught in shamanic practice, where we have the ability to not shine. You're not necessarily changing what you see, but it's becoming invisible. And I swear, I've almost done-- I'm in Santa Monica, and I'm dressed like a junkie. I've snuck past five bounty hunters, and they couldn't see me because I was one of the invisible people.

[01:00:11] I'm like, I'm not a gray man because I'm too tall and whatever. I stand out. But I did it. And then this guy just appears out of nowhere. I think he was invisible. And he's like, got you. I'm like, ah. And the reason he got me is because the cameraman who was filming for A& E-- cameramen have a different view. They see everything.

[01:00:31] So he could see right through my junkie outfit. But the fact that a bounty hunter who I was looking for could appear in front of me, and I couldn't see him until he revealed himself, that was so profound of a learning for me. And that reminds me what you're saying. You don't have to shout it in the wrong spot.

[01:00:51] But you don't have to change who you are. You're just not expressing it. And that's a way of maintaining honesty and integrity versus lying. And lying is very expensive. It's why there's actually now studies that show that even little white lies, your brain spends a lot of energy trying to keep track of them, and it spins up a lot of cycles. It's just not worth it. It's sometimes better to just not say the truth, which is different than lying.

[01:01:20] **Mark:** Yeah.

[01:01:21] **Dave:** That was a big learning for me. As we're getting to the end of the show, you've been doing retreats for 50 years, retreats and things like that. So by this point, you're probably more than a beginner. Tell me about a recent retreat you did. What would you do as someone who's been leading retreats for decades?

[01:01:40] **Mark:** What I do, and I feel like my job in holding these circles, these spaces, whether it's a small group or a large group, is to open a heart space. And we enter it for a weekend or a week to help introduce people to their own wisdom and their own gift. And the way that I do that is I often will open up themes through story, and metaphor, and poem, and then

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I will invite people into meditative journaling and conversation dialogue exercises to see where these things live in their own life.

[01:02:23] And then we come back and have a large integrative conversation, and we go through that cycle. In a weekend, we probably get through six or seven themes. And then I also offer where I live because I missed working with people over time. So I offer year-long journeys for a small group, like 16 or 18 people that come together four weekends over a year.

[01:02:48] We do that over a longer design and a journey. And I tell you, it's a real privilege to be in these authentic circles. And I'm always amazed. I feel like it's like spiritual jazz because you never know what's coming up. And when the heart space opens up enough, then when who's the teacher moves around the room, it doesn't get any better than that.

[01:03:22] **Dave:** That's such a beautiful way of expressing it. Naveen Jain, and Vishen Lakhiani from Mindvalley, and I are doing a similar program called the Apollo Group. And we're doing two in persons and deep dives once a quarter with the same group because it's the continuity over time. Like you said, we're not sure everything that's going to come out of it. But the idea of spiritual jazz is beautiful because it's the mix of the people and the teachers, not just the teachers talking.

[01:03:54] **Mark:** Yes, absolutely.

[01:03:55] **Dave:** Thank you for explaining it that way. That was really helpful for me to talk about why it works because we all know that it works that way. But yeah, you gave me a little nugget there. So much appreciated. The idea that the teacher finds the student or the teacher will appear when the student is ready, when you're talking about these small, intimate retreat things that you do, do you run big ad campaigns? How do the people know you're doing that?

[01:04:25] **Mark:** Oh, I do big promo things, but on my website, marknepo.com, there's just all the places I'm teaching and what I'm doing there, and my books can be found anywhere. And I have another page called livemarknepo.com, which is where my webinars are listed when I do--

[01:04:47] **Dave:** Got it. So you just do the basic thing, and then when people are called, they're called. That works. And it's funny. Some of my friends, Joe Dispenza announced something, and it fills up in five minutes, which is remarkable. I run a big conference, and it's a little bit of work

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to tell everyone because I feel like I have an obligation to let people who would benefit to know about it, and it's always a fine line between pushing people to go versus just making them aware.

[01:05:14] So I figured you must have some enlightened way to do that. Mark, as we come to a close, what is one lesson from your new book that I haven't asked you about that you feel would be most useful right now?

[01:05:31] **Mark:** Oh, I think most useful right now, two things come to mind. And this is in a very small poem of mine that goes like this, mystery is that whoever shows up when we dare to give has exactly what we need in their trouble. And I think that right now in the world, I feel there's so much suffering, and I feel for all people on all sides of things.

[01:06:01] And I feel like if humanity is a global body, every soul is a cell in that body. And therefore, anything that we do in terms of inner work or relational work to keep the global body more healthy than toxic is important. And so what does that mean on a daily level?

[01:06:22] On a daily level, I would encourage everyone to trust their heart. I think it's the most reliable, strongest muscle we have. And that means, for me, whenever I am confused, troubled, tangled, unsure, I stop and give my full attention to the nearest piece of life before me until it becomes my teacher.

[01:06:53] **Dave:** I love that. Thank you for a profound and insightful interview. There's actually a very dense amount of wisdom in your new book. You tell it in a beautiful way with a lot of stories and a lot of parables, and just a way where I feel like when I read it, I'm probably not going to get all of them, but I'll get the ones that appeal most to me. And I like to write in the same way. There's more here than you need, but the right stuff should pop out. Is that your intent, just that the people are going to find the nuggets in there?

[01:07:32] **Mark:** Absolutely. I feel like my job, like you're saying, is to cast as many seeds as possible because you don't know which ones will come up where. And I so want my readers to read my book slowly, to read a chapter, live life, read another chapter, live life, so that it's a conversation back and forth and integrative journey.

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[01:07:59] **Dave:** So you're recommending I put the audible version on 8x and just listen to it all in 20 minutes and be done. Maybe not. Mark, your book is Falling Down and Getting Up: Discovering Your Inner Resilience and Strength. And thanks again for being on the show.

[01:08:21] **Mark:** Oh, thank you so much for letting me be a part of your good work.