

The Relationship of People and Place

An Interview with Mark Nepo, Program Officer, The Fetzer Institute
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Seasons at The Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan

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Authenticity and Reciprocity

RL: Mark, What does the phrase “relationship between people and place” mean to you?

MN: When human beings authentically inhabit places, they continuously inform one another. It’s not just a one-way relationship with people inhabiting places. Places also inhabit people. It’s giving and receiving - they influence each other. Like the debate between evolution and God. I don’t see those things as exclusionary. Why can’t evolution be one of God’s tools or one of the laws by which the Tao works? It seems to me that these things are both/ands, and it’s easy to polarize them. In the same spirit, I think that when place and authentic people interact, they imbue each other. It’s like nature and nurture. They inform each other.

RL: Your use of the word authentic catches my attention. What do you mean by humans authentically inhabiting a place?

MN: This is the archetypal notion we talked about from your work with entrainment, Renee, where you suggest that when people find and speak their own truth, something shifts in their bodies and their vibrational field that aligns them with each other and with universal truths. Every tradition has a different name for it. In the Christian tradition it’s “where two or more are gathered.” In the Jewish tradition it’s Martin Buber’s “I-Thou.” In Hinduism it’s “thou art that.” In Buddhism, when we are still and breathe our single breath, we breathe the breath of the universe. In the Tao it’s the alignment of the fish with the stream. When we are authentically who we are, when we are real and honest, when we don’t hide back who we are, we not only connect with others, we connect with place. We have a sense of alignment with the whole. We inhabit that place.

In the Native American tradition, the basic worldview is called “all my relations”. Everything is considered part of the family of existence and our job is to inhabit those connections.

RL: So place is as much a part of relationship as other human beings.

MN: Yes, we have a relationship, or a friendship, with place and the whole as much as we do with other living things.

RL: So we are called to see place as a Thou rather than as an It. Doesn't this explain in part why we've helped destroy our planet, by relating to it as an It, something to be used and discarded?

MN: Yes, exactly.

RL: As you know, Mark, I'm exploring the relationship between groups of people and special gathering places for this study. Will you tell me about a meeting place or retreat center you have a special relationship with?

MN: Yes, I'd like to talk about Seasons, the retreat center affiliated with the Fetzer Institute. I have a long relationship with Seasons. I'd love to give you a sense of the context of the place and some experiences there.

A part of me was birthed when the meeting room at Seasons was birthed, just by synchronicity. Back in 1994 when it opened I was blessed to be the dedication speaker. I was asked to share in depth the story of my own spiritual awakening and my journey through cancer.

When I did that, I had the occasion to enter my own story and surface myself in public in a way that I never had. So that's why I say a part of me was birthed when that room was birthed. As a community that weekend, we invoked the Angel of Seasons in that space. It was baptized and ritualized to be a convening place. A safe place, a place where deep dialogue and openness could take place. Where we could always meet in a circle, and where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The theme around convening there over these last 14 years has been that we are more together than alone. So the kind of conversations from the beginning that have been invoked are not about persuasion or argument, but that all perspectives and voices are needed to approach the whole.

RL: So the original intention behind the creation of Seasons was to bring people together to listen to many perspectives, many voices?

Spiritual Power Spots

MN: Yes. It was built as a place to convene and bridge and have dialogue. Over the course of the years I've been part of dozens or maybe a hundred meetings there. They have included the widest variety of groups you can imagine. From shamans to doctors, to peace building practitioners from around the world, to students and burn survivors, heads of foundations, congressional staffers, physicists, multi-faith groups, and our own Fetzer trustee-staff gatherings three times a year. One of the things I've observed and want to share is that Seasons really has become a spiritual power spot. Having been in so many groups there, it is really palpable to me. Every group, regardless of the language they speak or the way of knowing they embrace, gets a jump start in their authentic conversation by being in that room.

RL: Just by being there?

MN: Yes, just by being there! It happens with every group that is authentically there. Every group leaves a little bit of its collective presence in the center of that circle. When a group goes in there and begins, people will remark that there is something different they feel in this space, even without knowing its history. It feels deeply hospitable. They feel more open here.

We are convening a project over the next couple of years – six individual gatherings - with congressional staffers from Washington. Originally we thought we'd have the retreats near DC so they would be more accessible to the participants. But the steering team, who had been part of an initial group we had two years ago at Seasons, unanimously asked if there was some way we could arrange to have them here instead. "When we were here, it was so transforming", they said, "it would make a huge difference if we could have the meetings at Seasons rather than in Washington." So we're changing it all to do that. It came from them.

RL: It sounds as if there is an energetic component to what you're talking about, Mark. Is there something that happens in the groups that meet at Seasons – spiritually or energetically – that settles in the place itself?

Accumulating Energy: Rituals, Journals and Circles

MN: I think this has a lot to do with the true purpose of ritual. Whatever the tradition, ritual at its best is what allows the best of the group to be left for the next one.

RL: Is ritual a part of every group experience?

MN: Yes, for the most part. Every group does it differently. Sometimes they stand in a Quaker-like circle where those who are moved offer a word or say what they have to say into the circle. Another way is to say what the smallest thing is that they will take from this circle back into the world or what it is they would like to leave in this circle for those that follow. Some groups invite in the presence or wisdom of others. One time we had community workers from Mississippi invoke their ancestors. Not literal blood ancestors, but people who they had always admired or strangers who had helped them. They wanted to invoke those around them and before them whose presence and spirit they wanted to be there for their conversation. It created a sense that they weren't the first to convene around these questions and they wouldn't be the last, that there were others who brought us into this conversation.

Another thing that we do at Seasons is that each room contains a journal. Everyone who stays here is asked to leave some reflection or feeling or whatever they want to write. That has created a lineage. Everyone who stays here goes through them and adds to them.

Meeting in a circle as a beginning place and ending place, even if you break out or do different things, is essential. There is no head to the circle, and we need all the views to get the total view. Native American elders, when they hold elder councils, meet in circles so everyone can see the center. I also think it's important to have a light in the center of the circle. We always light a candle because it signifies a tie to everything larger than ourselves through fire, one of the natural elements. It also signifies the lineage that humans have always tried to carry the light and it

connects us vertically to the divine. It's fragile, it can go out, but it's also larger than any one person's dreams. Some ritual opening and closing no matter how simple is important.

RL: Mark, what physical aspects of a place do you feel affect the quality of the human experience there?

Designing Intimate Space

MN: Size is one thing. If the space is a reasonable container for the size of the group, it makes a difference. If there is too much space and too small a group, it's hard to concentrate. If you have too small a space it's confining, suffocating and distracting. This is, again, about relationship, about treating place as a living thing to be in relationship with. In other words, if four or five of us were standing in a room, we wouldn't want to be so far apart that we couldn't talk or listen, but we wouldn't want to be too close together either so that we didn't have some space. Similarly, with our surroundings, we want place to be close enough to be able to relate with it. This is different, of course, with the outdoors where we may want the expansiveness of nature.

The nice thing about Seasons is that this relationship between people and place was done brilliantly, although I'm not sure anyone designed it with all of these aspects in mind. If we have the maximum of forty to fifty people, or the minimum of seven people, in the main meeting room you still get a sense of intimacy with the place. The space is open and there are windows along one side, and the four breakout rooms, even when not used, serve almost like the four directions, like some kind of poles of energy. If those breakout room weren't there, if there were just walls on all sides, it would change the feel and the effectiveness of the space. We use the rooms a lot, but even when we don't, they make the space more intimate.

RL: What effect do you think the large windows and the accessibility to nature have?

MB: There was a lot of thought and work that went into situating the buildings at Seasons where they are. The trees around Seasons, when it was built, were full grown and everything was done to minimize the disturbance to them. It was a huge undertaking. An enormous crane, several stories high, had to be placed on the meadow above to bring in materials. So yes, we believe the presence and influence of nature really does impact a group. It gives a sense of connectedness to everything. You're in a circle that is larger than you.

RL: Do you think that access to nature is necessary for transformative group experiences, Mark? I know for myself, I've experienced this phenomenon in a hotel conference room.

Everything is Part of Nature

MN: We tend to think of nature in only one form – outdoors, open, rural, trees. But really everything is part of nature, even man-made things. I learned this from Walt Whitman who was the first modern American poet to celebrate that everything is a part of nature. He would inhale deeply and take in everything, whether he was in a city or a field, and celebrate the brick and the street and the glass and the sounds of the train. It has a different flavor of energy, a different pace. But it is all a part of nature. We can have preferences, of course. Sometimes it's a paradox, like when people prefer silence to noise in many settings, but who decides what noise is? We tend to talk about noise as sound that is not preferable, but again, who's to say?

I had an experience last summer in New York City, sitting alone in a street side cafe, of feeling a sense of a wonderful urban stream of fish. I was in this human stream, people everywhere, sound everywhere. It was just as beautiful to me as being along the side of a river. That's not to say that at other times, though, it can feel overwhelming, congested, and annoying.

RL: So maybe it's how we interact with place. As we talked about before, it's about the relationship between us and place and how we're interacting at any given time. The I-Thou again, the space between.

MN: Yes, and if we have difficulty with a place, it may not be the place, it may be us. We're limited, the place is not. If I'm annoyed by the level of noise, it's me. The place is just the place. There is nothing wrong with me being annoyed, but I need to accept it as my limitation that is causing the annoyance, not the place.

RL: We've spoken about the physical aspects of place and space, is there anything else at Seasons that contributes to transformative experiences there?

Spiritual Hospitality

MN: There is a plaque in the main meeting house at Seasons that speaks to the ethic of hospitality that we offer. We take a lot of pride in the fact that our staff – people who work in culinary and guest services, in the building and on the grounds—embody our values. People comment all the time - without prompting - about how cared for they feel. They build relationships with the people in the kitchen. Something the sociologist Ivan Illich said toward the end of his life

captures how we feel about hospitality. He defined spiritual hospitality as “helping another across a threshold.” I love that. We try to do that here.

RL: That’s beautiful, Mark. As we come to the conclusion of our conversation, I’d like to ask about one more thing. I’m wondering what you think the role of the facilitator is in groups that meet in spiritual power spots such as Seasons. Someone told me they believe that their capacity to cultivate transformational meetings anywhere has been enhanced and influenced by immersion in places like this where the energy is concentrated through accumulation over time. Do you think that’s true for you when you facilitate in other places?

Authenticity and Reciprocity (Reprise)

MN: Yes and no. This goes back to the idea of nature and nurture informing each other. As a more general principle, the more experience we have at being who we are, at being authentic, the more we’re empowered to be who we are everywhere. I have lots of opportunities to be who I am at Seasons, but I also teach and do things elsewhere and I enter that space wherever I teach. The more chances we have to be authentic – and power places like this help with that – the more we can be authentic anywhere. These are not places to hide in. The idea is to have them help us expand out so that everywhere can be like Seasons.

The last thirty years of the retreat/workshop movement bears evidence that people are hungry for authentic place and connection. If traditional institutions like religions won’t provide it, there is a whole lay spirituality that has emerged where people with those needs create and convene spaces for themselves, which is wonderful. The occupational hazard here is that a lot of the time these lay spaces have become refuges rather than places that empower people to come out of the

closet with their authenticity. So the archetypal shadow appears where someone goes through a life changing experience and they have trouble transitioning back into the “real world.” Yet it’s all the same world. Or someone goes through a set of experiences in which they grow and then go back to a partner who in their mind hasn’t grown, and they split up. What’s happening in these lay spaces is real, to be sure. But so is everything else. Treating the power of specific places as a refuge rather than a threshold prevents us from integrating our authentic experience everywhere. We all had that authenticity and holiness when we entered these spaces. And like dormant seeds, if blessed, something in the power of place allows us to blossom. But the next question is how do we take it back out into the world?

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This interview was conducted by Renee Levi as part of her research for the Powers of Place Initiative. The full report, *The Powers of Place: An Inquiry Into the Influence of Place, Space, and Environment on Collective Transformation* (2008) can be found at [AMY: Please add a link to the study here]. For the study, eight in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed to discern underlying themes and patterns about qualities of transformative meeting places and spaces.

To give the reader a fuller picture of what was shared in the interviews themselves, we present the full text from the conversations. We see these interviews as a resource, part of a growing database and source of information for further research and individual learning. Any one interview can be seen for its unique set of ideas and as part of a whole.



*Mark Nepo is a poet and philosopher who has taught in the fields of poetry and spirituality for over thirty years. He has published eleven books and recorded three CDs. His most recent titles are *Facing the Lion Being the Lion: Finding Inner courage Where It Lives* (Red Wheel-Weiser). *Surviving Has Made Me Crazy* (CavanKerry) and *Inner Courage* (CD, Three Intentions). Of special note is *The Exquisite Risk* (Harmony Books), which *Spirituality & Health Magazine* cited as one of the Best Spiritual Books of 2005, calling it “one of the best books we’ve ever read on what it takes to live an authentic life.” *The Book of Awakening* was a finalist for the 2000 Books for a Better Life Award and was cited by *Spirituality and Health Magazine* as one of the Best Spiritual Books of 2000. His work has been translated into French, Portuguese, Japanese, and Danish. Mark serves as a Program Officer for the Fetzer Institute.*

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