

Our Fierce Impulse to Live

By Mark Nepo

From a spiritual perspective, attachment is the complex of dynamics that bind our capacity for love to self-centered desires. The root of the word, a-tache, means nailed to. Spiritual traditions see attachment as nailing our capacity for love to something other than what it was meant for.-Gerald May

At first, our fierce impulse to live is bent on survival, fending off events and each other. But then, by some ever-shifting miracle, our stubbornness is broken and we are moved, if blessed, through that primitive survival into a deeper reality in which our lives depend wholly on each other, the way blood relies on organs to keep it flowing. A complex journey stands between our primitive want to survive and this more humble recognition of how everything is connected. That journey takes many of us through the purging of our attachments. Or, as Gerald May so powerfully puts it, we must live through the nailing of our capacity to love to certain ideas, people, and things. Just how does attachment start? It's hard to say, but I know, for me, like many, it began when as a boy my want to live and my want to be loved became confused. Pretty soon, I nailed my sense of survival to the idea that life was only possible if in love. When love relationships failed, I grew desperate to make them work, to make them last, until I gave myself away as kindling to keep the fire of life as I imagined it going.

Often, our personal forms of attachment grow out of painful situations that we spend much of our lives trying to correct. My mother was an angry person. She seethed and smoldered much of the time. It was like living near a volcano, never sure when it might erupt. I'm not sure what painful situation she was reacting to. But I quickly learned how to absorb her heat and threw my attention on her like water. But it was never enough. There was always more fire than I had water. And even when leaving home, I looked for fires to put out, thought this was love. I became attached to the idea and kept thinking, "If I could only find more water."

Once our fierce impulse to live is nailed to what we want or think we want, that fierceness keeps us from the direct joy of living. Feeling cut off, we work harder and longer at getting what we want. If worked at hard enough and long enough, our attachment can deepen into addiction—that is, we can make a god of attachment. In fact, we could say that addiction is a collapse of attention by which we pursue one thing repeatedly, as if that one thing will give us everything, as if that one thing sucked on enough will take away the pain of living.

Whatever the object of such focus—alcohol, drugs, love, sex, success, money, the thrill of adventure, or the tumble of crisis-addiction is attachment run wild until, like a self-replicating Midas, everything we touch turns into our troubled self. Ironically, addiction attaches to everything in its path, nailing our troubled self everywhere we go, when all we want is to lead our self out of its trouble.