



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 033 – Book Commentary:  
*The Way of Integrity - Finding the Path to Your True Self*  
May 2, 2021

00:05

Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

Hello and welcome to Episode 33. Thanks so much for joining me. I love when I record a podcast and stumble on a personal insight. That happened in Episode 31 when I was describing a wellness realization I had in my mid 40s that was not visible on the outside, but transformative on the inside.

During that episode, I said something like all the tools and methods I relied upon for decades were of no use to me anymore. It seems to me that every time I'm about to experience a big leap, I get that same feeling like I have no tools in my toolbox that are useful. It used to unnerve me, but now I see it as a signal that the amusement ride is about to begin.

I came across the work of Dr. Martha Beck, who is a best selling author, life coach and speaker. A few years ago when I was creating Athena Wellness and envisioning a life beyond my long term corporate career, her books, *Finding Your Own North Star* and



*Finding Your Way in a Wild New World* helped me broaden my perspective with clear examples of others who were living the type of life I longed for myself.

For those who are unfamiliar with Dr. Beck, along with publishing a number of memoirs and self help books, she wrote a monthly column for *O, the Oprah Magazine* for almost two decades. Martha holds three Harvard degrees in social science and Oprah Winfrey has called her, "One of the smartest women I know." Not too shabby...

Last month, Martha's latest book, *The Way of Integrity - Finding the Path to Your True Self*, was published. I took long walks and listened to the almost nine hour audio book over a few days, while reviewing certain passages and exercises in the hardcover version in the evening.

I'm still absorbing it all. But I can tell you this, Martha has a gift for naming the things others are feeling. And most importantly, she provides strategies to help us move forward. I found *The Way of Integrity* to be a useful roadmap as we wind our way through pandemic and post pandemic life. So much so that I'd like to share some of the main concepts because I think you'd enjoy it as well.

You may even recognize some parallels in our respective work. What Martha refers to as living with integrity, I call wholehearted living. And we both agree that the only way to access this inner place of truth is what Martha calls stillness, and I call the still point. And lastly, we both believe in the power of taking small consistent steps forward.

I'll put a link to Martha's website that has all of her books on it in the show notes so you can check out her work. But for now, I invite you to sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence, and let's get started.



04:00

The Divine Comedy is a long narrative poem, like 14,000 lines long, written by Dante Alighieri in the 14th century. It's considered to be one of the greatest literary works and certainly the crowning jewel in Italian literature. Full disclaimer, I've only read excerpts, but from its beginning line, "Midway through the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark forest, for the right way was lost," It's clear that we're about to go on an epic mystical journey with Dante, as he emerges from the dark wood descends into hell, up through purgatory, before he finally reaches paradise.

Dr. Beck uses this Hero's Journey framework to create a four stage process for self realization: 1. Recognizing the **Dark Wood**, where we get lost; 2. Exploring and understanding the **Inferno** of self betrayal; 3. Using integrity as a way through **Purgatory**; and 4. Arriving in **Paradise** to live the life we were meant to live in service, alignment, and happiness.

The journey she leads us through is filled with compelling personal stories, along with the stories of clients and friends. She also includes exercises throughout the book to drive the point home and turn the theoretical into practical, useful action. What I found most useful is learning how to recognize and work with our internal signals as a way to our truth beyond societal expectation.

Before we embark on the journey, let's talk a bit about integrity. Beck defines it this way, "Integrity is to be one thing, whole and undivided." She believes that integrity brings a sense of purpose of emotional healing and a life free of mental suffering. That what ails us is the result of being out of touch with who we truly are. So when all aspects of our life are working together, we operate in flow - joyfully and with ease.



06:29

Before we begin, I invite you to bring to mind a situation where you feel things are a little off, or a place where you may be hiding yourself a bit. It could be a professional situation, a point of contention in a personal relationship, or a place in your life that feels dull and lackluster. As we move through this process together, substitute your story for the ones that I'll be sharing.

So let's start in the **Dark Wood**. When I think of being in the dark forest, I'm reminded of the Talking Heads song, *Once in a Lifetime*, where David Byrne sings, "You may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?" By the time you realize you're lost, you have no idea how you wandered off the path.

We veer off course one step at a time, distracted or unwilling to acknowledge the micro compromises we're making, until we're in a place that's unrecognizable. We may feel any number of things: confused, troubled, unsure, exhausted, or just plain lost. The way those feelings manifest can be as subtle as misalignment of mind, body and spirit, or more intensely, like physical pain, emotional turmoil, professional and personal failure, feeling trapped by cultural or societal expectations and responsibilities, or just a vague sense of purposelessness.

During my 20s, and 30s, I can remember feeling each of those things at different times. But overall, it was a feeling of being trapped by expectation and responsibilities, which led to a search for passion and meaning in my 40s and 50s.

What I was blissfully unaware of, however, was this search would lead straight to the shadow side of life, the **Inferno**. Thankfully, this part of the journey is not about fire and



brimstone, although it can feel like that sometimes. Rather, it's about what's making us suffer our own version of hell. In other words, our thoughts, beliefs and feelings that we've compartmentalized in order to avoid them.

It's been my experience that what inflames the Inferno is my own resistance to what it's trying to show or teach me when I feel myself engulfed in the flames. The more I surrender to the process, the easier it becomes. I can relax in the understanding that I have a choice - flail in denial or move through with acceptance.

The process of moving through the inferno will help you become aware of where you're going against your true nature in an effort to please or fit in. Examining these beliefs and ways of being will help you see what's really true for you and heal those divisions. Over time, you'll be able to notice your patterns and avoid the pitfalls that once trapped you. You'll learn ways to recognize truth - how it feels in your body (relaxed), how it feels in your mind, (ease), and in your heart (open). Which leads us right into **Purgatory**.

Purgatory is about putting truth into practice. It's about aligning external behavior to your emerging inner truth. It's about being unwilling to lie or hide in any way.

As you can imagine, this is much harder than it sounds. Most of us are not serial liars, looking to deceive or manipulate. But we do tell social lies to be nice because we don't want to offend or confront anyone. We may say we're busy when we don't want to do something or reply that we're fine when someone asks how we are and we're really not that well. We may also omit details that distort the truth in some way. Even tolerating a situation can create internal disharmony.



Dr. Beck believes that when we don't stand in truth, this is a form of self betrayal. She also notes that lying and keeping secrets is bad for health. And such behavior has been linked to heart disease, cancer, and emotional disorders.

11:34

One of the things that I found helpful was to hone in on what it physically and emotionally feels like when I'm coming from a place of inner truth versus when I'm acting in accordance with cultural acceptance. When I'm aligned with my real self, I have a sense of freedom and being in flow with life. When I'm trying to accommodate someone else's expectations, I feel friction and a sense of being bound.

To drive this point home, Beck challenges us to what she calls an integrity cleanse, that is, a No-Lie Challenge for a minimum of a week. She's done this exercise for an entire year at a time and then repeated it numerous times over with traumatic effect and outcome. I like to incorporate this into my journaling practice, exploring times when I'm not aligned, what it feels like, and how I can quickly get back on track.

Now that we've identified what's true for us and aligned it with our external world by saying what we really mean, it's time for the last step, doing what we really want to do, which is the ultimate goal of living in integrity. When we live this way, we make the world a kinder, more just and healthier place for all.

This is where small steps come in. Dr. Beck calls them one degree turns, explaining that in the thousands of choices we make each day, each one is a chance to turn toward the life you really want.



I can attest firsthand of the power of doing what you really want to do. Whether it was writing, coaching, teaching, learning about wellness, starting a business, launching a podcast, all the things I get to do each day in my life now. It all started with the smallest of steps.

I can't overemphasize how important these small actions are to changing the trajectory of life. Writing on my commute into New York City decades ago gave way to reading books about the craft, taking workshops, spending a weekend here or there writing, and then ultimately, a week long writing retreat where I came home with an outline for my first book.

My life didn't change dramatically, but it did change incrementally. And without those small steps, I wouldn't be talking to you today. So I encourage you, whatever you long to spend time doing, do it. Even if it's for a few minutes here or there. If you do it consistently, time will begin to avail itself to you so you can do more of it. And there's a spillover effect, you'll feel better and others will feel those good vibes, which leads us to **Paradise**.

This is where life flows because your inner and outer lives are in alignment and I can tell from personal experience, it's even better than you can imagine. Here's an indication that you've arrived: someone will acknowledge your awesome life and will either have the impression that it was easy for you or that you've always lived this way. You're in Paradise when it's not evident that you've made your way out of the Dark Wood through the Inferno, did your reps in Purgatory and then took thousands of baby steps toward your true nature.



Living in Paradise is not about hanging on the beach, drinking margaritas, although sometimes that's called for. But it's about living in true alignment with yourself where all the elements of life are in sync and flowing smoothly. It's actually better than eternal beach bumming. It's an invitation to synchronicity and mystery. And that's when life gets really interesting.

16:03

The book wraps up with a wide angle view. The last two chapters take the broader world into account or our Common Humanity. It's beautifully written and ties the whole journey together with an analogy of the patterns that occur in the natural world called fractals. I won't spoil the conclusion for you, but I will say the book ends on notes of hope and peace.

Some advice for the journey...

Whether we're aware of it or not, we're on a continuous life journey where we experienced the Dark Woods, the Inferno and Purgatory. And to me, this is growth. But when we're in this cycle, it's easy to lose sight of Paradise, of the purpose of learning these life lessons.

Writer Christina Baldwin calls this journey The Survivors Tale. The first step, as she outlines it, usually begins with a life event, which makes us reflect on our lives, question and make adjustments, integrate the story, and ultimately make meaning of the experience. This reclaiming of the Self brings us into new territory and a sense of peace and grace as we grow into a new sense of Self.





Sounds like Paradise, doesn't it? I'll put a link in the show notes to a one page diagram of Christina's Spiral of Experience if you'd like to have a look.

So with all that in mind, here are **some things I find helpful** as I navigate my own ongoing Spiral of Experience:

**The first is integrity keeps you on your true path.** I agree with Dr. Beck that we know at our deepest levels what makes us happy and what our best life looks like. But it's social standards that cause the division between who we are and who we longed to be. When we conform, we overrule who we are by pleasing others and trying to fit in. And we do it at the expense of ourselves, splitting us from our deepest sense of truth.

But what I've found is that knowing what makes us happy is not always glaringly evident. In fact, it's usually quite subtle. It asks us to quiet so we can hear it. And that's why I'm such a fan of journaling, meditating and taking long walks. They quiet me to the point where I can sense my next true step.

**The second is to trust your inner teacher.** I love learning - books, podcasts, art of all kinds, deep conversation, time in solitude, real life experience. Quality input for me to sift through and consider and to be able to assimilate it when I feel that it's useful. Not everything is helpful. In fact, I get more discerning on what I let into my experience as I get older, sorting the junk food from what will nourish and challenge me, helping me stretch to get to a new place. And the only way to determine what's truly helpful in that moment is to rely on my inner wisdom, how it makes me feel in mind, body and spirit. It takes practice, but it becomes my most valuable tool, like an inner compass pointing to True North.



**The last point is that the journey is circular and the travel gets easier.** We'll enter the Dark Wood and begin the process repeatedly throughout our lives. We're always learning, we're always in different places along the path, trusting, surrendering, allowing, again and again. And it gets easier each time you do because we come to learn that there's nothing to fear. While the situations you're facing may change, you know if you do the work to align with your truth, the path will lead to Paradise.

I'd like to end with a closing quote from the book: "When we fully dissolve the lie of being isolated within ourselves, we join Dante and everyone else, everything else. We forget ourselves as small doomed beings on a threatened planet. And, as Dante wrote, "Remember ourselves as the love that moves the sun and the other stars."

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit [www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast](http://www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast).

Until next time, be well!