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Company Along the Way

On words and imagination
when not everything can be resolved



Contents

Foreword 3

1 Wanting something to help 4

2 An explanation to live with 7

3 When helping begins to ask something of us 10

4 Surrender and resistance 15

5 Contributing within our capacity 19

6 Giving and receiving care 22

7 What words can open 26

8 A place to stay for a while 30

9 What may remain open 33

Afterword 35

Sources and the making of this book 36

Foreword

There are many books on my shelves. Some I have kept for years. Among them I find thoughts about life, consciousness, grief and what might remain after death. Some passages speak to me. Others I leave alone. Existence remains a mystery to me, even with a bookcase full of words about it.

That attitude matters to this book. I want to explore what can sustain people when life is difficult. My own experiences help me ask questions. They do not give me a complete view of anyone else’s life. What feels meaningful to me today may change. And someone reading these pages may recognise something even from a very different set of beliefs.

De Vrede van Overgave grew out of a long period of restlessness and a search for relief. I sought help, underwent treatment and explored many ideas and approaches. Some experiences brought me something. Much remained difficult. The stories, writing and images I now share have become a personal way of making something available to others. The initiative is free and non-commercial.

My own searching has taken many forms. I found enjoyment in work and also reached the limits of what I was trying to keep up. I now work and study in care. I also volunteer with De Luisterlijn, a Dutch listening service. Its emphasis on listening touches on the questions in this book. I write here in a personal capacity.

How can we be somewhere without continually having to prove ourselves? What does accepting something mean when there is also reason to resist it? What can we do for one another when love cannot change the circumstances? And what can a story offer someone who finishes listening and simply continues with the same day?

I want to think carefully about these questions. That includes the ideas that appeal to me. Reassurance can create pressure. The word space can become an expectation. A writer who says he has no answers may still be prescribing, quite precisely, how the reader should see things. My own words deserve the same questions as anyone else’s.

I hope this is a book in which thought and humanity keep each other company. Where a question can go beyond the first reassuring answer. And where an ordinary afternoon remains, with something to do, someone to call or little appetite for grand ideas.

1 Wanting something to help

A book lies on a table, a strip of paper between its pages. Someone has underlined a sentence. It is a thought that once seemed clear. Today the words are exactly the same, but they barely reach him. He reads the paragraph again. Last month he found this helpful. What has changed?

This is a familiar difficulty with finding something to hold on to. What helps us at one moment is not always available at another. You can remember feeling relieved after a conversation without being able to recover that relief. You can know which music you enjoy and still be unable to bear any music. Sometimes the thought remains just as valuable; it is this day that is different.

I have collected writing myself, so I could return to it at such moments. Many voices stand alongside one another in my earlier collections: spiritual reflections, practical suggestions and thoughts about restlessness. I wrote out what spoke to me, keeping it available when an insight felt further away. Those collections were bound up with my own searching.

There is something very ordinary about collecting in this way. When life is difficult, you want to be able to do something. Make an appointment. Understand what is happening. Find someone who says: I know something about that. There is little strange about this wish. Someone who sleeps badly wants to sleep. Someone in pain seeks relief. Someone who feels lonely may long for an encounter in which they feel less alone.

We would do that wish an injustice if, looking back, we called it only a failure to accept things. Searching may be necessary. It can lead to appropriate care, missing information or someone who really listens. Some problems persist because they go unnoticed. Sometimes asking further questions is precisely the care a situation requires.

But searching has no obvious endpoint. Someone offers you something, you try it and find that it helps. Or helps very little. Sometimes you are unsure. You have a few different habits, a new insight and the same difficult evenings. Then another possibility appears. There is always a book you have not read, an explanation you do not know, an approach that has meant a great deal to someone else.

At some point, your relationship with searching may change. You no longer read out of curiosity, but for fear of missing something essential. A free evening becomes time you really ought to spend working on yourself. You can go for a walk while judging whether you are sufficiently in the moment. Searching has come along everywhere.

There is no neat boundary you cross one day. The same action can arise from different wishes. You might meditate because you enjoy it, because you are curious or because you want the restlessness to stop at last. Those motives can overlap. An intention need not be pure before something can be worthwhile.

We can, however, ask what searching costs today. Is there still time when you simply do something? Watch a film without judging whether it is a distraction? Eat with someone without examining your own reactions? Sometimes life has already demanded a great deal of our attention before we turn it into a personal investigation as well.

For me, the wish for relief has taken different forms. Work could bring appreciation and financial breathing room. Closeness could calm me. I have also used substances to feel less unsettled, with consequences that could make life harder. This does not fit a simple story of wrong choices followed, eventually, by the right insight. A wish can be understandable while the way we meet it becomes harmful.

That distinction deserves attention. Understanding a wish does not remove the consequences of behaviour. Equally, it helps little to address someone only in terms of those consequences, overlooking what they were trying to bear. Someone longing for peace is often seeking something deeply human. What is needed next may be protection, treatment, practical support or a change in circumstances. A book cannot decide that for someone.

Nor do I want to arrange my own history as proof that searching has to fail before surrender becomes possible. That would make a difficult period the necessary path to this book after all. I do not know that. There are things I would rather not have experienced. What comes from them does not make them necessary in retrospect.

Looking back, we easily make a story in which everything was leading somewhere. The difficult job apparently had something to teach me. The relationship that ended made room for a new beginning. Some people genuinely recognise themselves in that account. It can be a way of finding coherence. But the other possibility can also be voiced: this happened, it has consequences, and I do not know whether there is a larger meaning attached to it.

The question of what helps becomes less straightforward. Sometimes something helps because it changes a problem. Sometimes it supports you in living on with the same problem. And sometimes it is simply pleasant. You laughed at a scene in a film. It was good to see someone. We do not have to discover an invisible mechanism to appreciate such an experience.

That last possibility is easily lost when life has long revolved around symptoms and difficulties. Everything acquires a function. Sleep for recovery. Walks to reduce tension. Talking to process something. Those connections may matter, of course. Yet an afternoon takes on a different flavour when every part of it must contribute to a better tomorrow. Pleasure almost becomes a treatment you carry out carefully.

You can also walk because you want to see whether a tree has leaves yet. Go outside because it is too warm indoors. Read a book because someone has invented an odd character. Such motives need be no less worthy than taking care of yourself. They belong to the life we are trying so hard to make room for.

Even aimlessness can become a task. From now on I must think less about myself and learn to enjoy ordinary things. The mindful walk is replaced by carefully purposeless walking. Little has changed about the strictness.

That is why it seems useful to stay close to concrete situations. Someone finishes a book and puts it down. There is still a pan on the stove. An appointment needs rearranging. Reflection need not pass judgement on any of it. At some moments, enquiry fits; at others, something else needs attention. That difference need not be settled every evening.

Nor is it always an individual choice. Someone with money and spare time has different opportunities to search from someone who can barely pay the rent. Appropriate help may be missing. A waiting list may be long. The question of why someone is still struggling is then not only a question about their inner attitude. Sometimes support simply is not available.

A book about surrender needs to be honest about this. Otherwise we place on the reader something that is also the responsibility of others. We tell someone they can be gentler with themselves when their life chiefly calls for a reliable income or adequate care. Inner space and the practical conditions of living are connected. Neither should obscure the other.

So the question of what helps has several answers, which need not continually compete. You can receive treatment and enjoy listening to a story. Solve a practical problem and remain sad about what does not change. You can value an idea and decide you have little use for it today.

The book on the table is still open. The underlined sentence need not be erased because it does little today. It can remain. The reader can turn the page or pick up something entirely different. It is time to eat.

2 An explanation to live with

An explanation can mean a great deal. You discover that something has a name. That others know a similar experience. That there may be a reason why a particular situation takes so much out of you. What long felt like a personal failing gains a broader context. Sometimes this also helps you ask for support more specifically.

I know the wish to understand what happens within me. Over the course of my life I have looked at my restlessness in different ways: through conversations and treatment, by writing down my life history and by reading. Some connections have helped me organise my experiences. That does not make every connection an established cause.

Looking back, I remember both warmth and unease. The meaning of such memories has changed over my life. I try to find words for my own experience without using them to explain other people’s lives or intentions.

We look back from the present. The adult of today knows different concepts from before and sees connections that were not visible then. This can help understanding, but it can also give the impression that all the separate experiences finally form one conclusive account.

A life cannot, however, be repeated to discover what would have happened without a particular event. I can see meaningful connections between earlier experiences and later needs. I cannot establish with certainty how each part has worked through my life. The word possible keeps that boundary visible. It does not make the experience unimportant; it prevents my explanation from exceeding what I know.

There is also a difference between asking what caused something and asking what it means now. A memory can hurt today without being the origin of every current difficulty. A diagnosis can help someone find appropriate support while saying little about what a particular friendship means to them. Different questions call for different kinds of answers.

That distinction also concerns the books on my shelves. A spiritual thought may appeal to me because it makes something recognisable or offers a sense of connection. This does not establish how my body works, why someone became ill or what happens after death. The value of a thought can be personal. A medical explanation must meet different requirements.

We run into trouble when those kinds of knowledge merge unnoticed. An image involving energy may fit someone’s experience of a busy afternoon. Once the same word is used to explain why a treatment works, more than recognition is needed. It may sound as though we are talking about the same thing, but the nature of the claim has changed.

The reverse happens too. A study may measure something occurring in a particular group under particular circumstances. This does not yet answer the question of how I should value my life. Science can provide important knowledge without determining the meaning of a human life. Even a well-supported finding must be connected carefully to the question for which we use it.

Meanwhile, the need for an explanation is very human. A name can bring relief. A cause can reduce the feeling of being at the mercy of something. Sometimes understanding also offers ways to act. If you know why something does not work, you can try a different approach. I do not want to diminish that value.

Yet an explanation can contain an unintended assignment. Someone told that their pain comes from unprocessed feelings may begin to think they have not done enough inner work. Someone who believes events are intended for growth may wonder why they have not yet found anything good in them. The explanation then offers more than coherence; it also distributes responsibility.

That is why I want to ask what an explanation places on someone. Does it make something more understandable? Open a practical possibility? Or mainly give them a new reason to judge themselves? The same thought may reach different people differently. This makes responsiveness more important than how persuasively I can offer an explanation.

An explanation can also reassure by excluding contradiction. If an approach helps, that confirms the idea behind it. If it does not, someone is not ready yet or has a deeper blockage. Every outcome can then fit the same account. It becomes difficult to discover whether the explanation might be wrong.

When knowledge presents itself as factual, the possibility of error matters. What would change our minds? What other explanation might there be? Is there anything that would show us that the promise is too great? Such questions need not disturb curiosity. They protect the freedom to think differently.

Personal beliefs are different. Someone may believe a loved one who has died is still close. Someone else mainly experiences the memories and habits that

remain. People can talk about this without reaching the same conclusion. It becomes harder when one person makes their own explanation the true meaning of the other’s grief.

There are limits, though, to what the word mystery can accommodate. If someone claims a remedy cures a serious illness, asking for evidence cannot be replaced by respect for different truths. There are also consequences for people who must make a choice. A view of existence may remain open; a specific health promise requires justification.

It is tempting to create two worlds here: certain knowing and warm feeling. In practice, people are less neatly arranged. A researcher can feel wonder. Someone with a spiritual belief can examine claims critically. Intuition can prompt a question, after which careful investigation is needed. We need not confine ourselves to one kind of thinking.

Not knowing takes different forms too. Sometimes information is missing but obtainable. Searching may then be sensible. Sometimes a question cannot be answered for now. And sometimes different worldviews offer different answers. It helps to know which kind of uncertainty we face. Otherwise we call something a mystery when a practical check is possible, or demand evidence for what someone is describing as personal meaning.

A person can also know something without yet being able to reach it emotionally. You know a relationship is over and still hope for a message. You understand why someone made a choice and still feel abandoned. This need not be a lack of insight. Understanding does not automatically change an experience.

Here lies a limit to explanation. You can tell someone ever more precisely why they are sad. At some point they may have heard enough. There is still sadness. There is still a meal to make. Perhaps they want to go for a drive or talk about something unrelated to that history.

A good conversation can thus make room for an explanation and let it rest again. It need not always play the leading role. Someone is still present when their story is not being examined. An afternoon together need not become an opportunity for personal analysis just because there is something to understand.

The question of who I am remains in motion. An explanation can illuminate part of the story. My existence need not wait for its last page.

3 When helping begins to ask something of us

‘So, is it helping at all?’

Imagine someone asking you this when you meet again after a few weeks. You have told them about a treatment, a conversation or something you are trying to get through the days. They remembered. That can feel good. Someone wants to know how you are.

You search for an answer. There were a few pleasant days. You slept well once. Yesterday was difficult. Or what you tried has given you something, just not the kind of change the other person is asking about. You understand yourself better and feel just as unsettled. You have received help and can still do very little. As you speak, you see the other person thinking. Another suggestion follows.

It may become a good conversation. A possibility you had not thought of. Someone thinking things through with you when you have lost your bearings. There are moments when another person sees something you could not see alone. We would deny one another a great deal if fear of saying the wrong thing stopped us offering any advice at all.

Yet something can also shift in such a conversation. You came to say how you were, and now you are explaining why you are not better yet. You list what you have already tried. Why a piece of advice does not fit. How much effort the past week took. Before you know it, you have to make a convincing case that you really are doing your best.

That shift often begins with a well-meant question that keeps looking in the same direction. Towards more energy. Less pain. A next step. You notice which answers bring relief and which make the conversation difficult. In time, you start by mentioning the one thing that did go well.

The other person's care has not disappeared. Someone who cares deeply about you may long intensely for good news. It is hard to see someone struggling. You want to be able to do something. When you cannot, you may feel unnecessary, or frightened of what lies ahead. A suggestion gives the helper something to hold on to as well. At least there is something else to try.

You can help someone out of love and feel relieved yourself when things improve. It becomes burdensome when the other person has to provide that

relief for you. Someone already carrying a great deal is given another task: showing that your attention is producing results.

Such an expectation can be present even without a visitor. You chose a treatment yourself. Bought a book, done exercises, set aside time. Of course you hope it helps. After all that effort, you want to notice a difference. When no difference comes, it is easy to ask what else you should have done. A search for relief can slowly become a daily investigation into your own shortcomings.

Sometimes investigation is useful. An approach may need adjusting. You may lack information or need more support. But there are also mornings when asking why things are not better yet adds little to the effort of getting out of bed. That morning may mainly call for breakfast and someone to take the children to school. What is needed does not always have to be a new insight.

In 1957, Carl Rogers wrote about conditions that he believed made change possible in psychotherapy. These included accepting the client as a person and trying to understand their experience. He added something essential: the client must also be able to experience something of that understanding and acceptance. In his proposal, the therapist's attitude alone is not enough.[1]

Rogers was examining a therapeutic relationship. A conversation between friends involves a different responsibility. Still, his thought brings a useful question close to home: how does my concern reach you? I may consider myself patient while you feel hurried. I may think I am listening carefully while you notice that I am mainly waiting for the moment when I can offer my solution. My intention does not give me a complete view of your experience.

We often understand one another only partly. A remark may land badly on a tired afternoon and become valuable later. Sometimes you return to it. ‘I immediately started talking about things you could try. What was that like for you?’ Perhaps the other person was pleased with the advice. Their answer helps you adjust.

I volunteer with De Luisterlijn. That involvement reminds me of the importance of listening and treating what someone entrusts to you with care. The reflections in this book are my own. I describe no conversations and do not speak on behalf of the organisation.

In everyday encounters, too, I notice my wish to make a difference. Can I allow a silence to remain, and adjust when someone wants more response? What someone is looking for becomes clearer as we go along. The other person retains a say in what happens between us.

There are many spiritual books on my shelves. They contain thoughts from people who wanted to understand or share something, sometimes from a deep conviction. I enjoy reading them. Sometimes an image or a question stays with me for a while.

I do not take such thoughts as established truths. My intuition plays a part in what I take in. Something that means something to me today may become less important later. Existence remains a mystery to me. Curiosity can live alongside that, and the pleasure of reading. I do not first have to decide what reality ultimately is before a passage is allowed to move me.

Sharing such a passage brings a new responsibility. A thought that supports me does not tell me what someone else needs. If I read about growing through pain, I may find meaning in it for myself. But how does that sound to someone who has just lost a child? Or someone who, after years of illness, is mainly tired of everything they are still supposed to learn and work through?

The same words can work in different ways. The idea of a greater whole may help someone feel less alone. For someone else, it raises the question of why that whole permits so much sorrow. Someone else may simply not want to think about a purpose. When I offer what supports me, that last response must remain a real possibility too.

People can offer one another something that unexpectedly fits. A poem you would never have found yourself. A friend telling you what helped them through a difficult time. Together you can explore what speaks to you and what you would rather leave aside.

Things become more constricting when my idea begins to explain your experience. I know, for example, that your resistance is holding back your growth, while you are trying to tell me that a situation is unjust. Or I see an invitation in your pain while you are asking for relief. An answer that means something to me can come between us. I still hear your words, but they have already been assigned a place in my story.

Reassuring language can do this too. Saying that something deep within remains untouched and whole may comfort someone. Another person recognises nothing of themselves in it. If they feel broken, it helps little if I then explain that they simply cannot yet reach their true essence. Their own experience must then give way to my certainty about them.

I want to leave room for a thought that helps me while someone else finds it unusable. That calls for attention to what words do when they travel from one person to another. A personal belief can be shared with a willingness to hear

that it means nothing to someone. The conversation then remains open to an answer I had not anticipated.

Another pitfall lies close by. Once we become cautious about solutions, we may turn listening into the right answer. We decide that people mainly need acknowledgement. That sounds attentive, until someone actually asks for help with a form, transport or pain for which no suitable treatment has yet been found. A conversation that keeps returning to how difficult everything is offers them little.

The presence approach, as described by Stichting Presentie, connects involvement with getting to know what matters to the other person. That relationship helps make clear which help fits. Practical action belongs here too. In this approach, attention is connected with professional skill and doing what is possible.[2]

This makes the question of what helping asks of us more concrete. Who sets the direction we follow? If someone says they want to be able to visit their children again, we can explore what that requires. A conversation about their sorrow may be welcome. Perhaps transport also needs arranging. A lack of money does not disappear because someone feels heard. Circumstances deserve as much attention as the way someone experiences them.

Those providing care face limitations as well. You have another appointment. More people are waiting. You can understand that someone needs time and know that the time is barely available. It would be easy to place that shortage at the door of your ability to work attentively. Helpers have circumstances too. Good intentions do not abolish schedules, physical limits and responsibilities.

Sometimes appropriate help therefore asks for something beyond the conversation. An appointment organised differently. More support, a clearer division of tasks, or someone voicing a concern others overlook. A thought about surrender can also conceal what could be changed. Acknowledging the situation as it is can be precisely what prompts us to speak up.

With people who use few words or none, the question of how help is received calls for even greater care. You can attend to a movement, a sound or a change in facial expression. But your interpretation remains an interpretation. A smile does not tell you everything. Silence may seem like agreement and mean something else. It helps to keep looking together, draw on earlier experiences and allow your own assumptions to be examined too.

There is no place here for a fixed expectation of development. Someone may remain dependent for a long time. An ability may be lost. Contact may be hard

to establish at certain moments. If we measure the value of our care solely by progress, we lose sight of what happens between people today. Listening to music together can matter even when nothing has become demonstrably easier tomorrow.

The same applies to gratitude. I notice that I can feel grateful where there was once mainly heaviness. That difference means something to me. I would handle it carelessly if I used it to tell someone else where they might eventually arrive. Gratitude is difficult to receive when it becomes the desired ending of someone else's story.

The other person may be angry about their dependence. Grateful for help and at the same time sad about what they can no longer do. Or mainly concerned with whether someone will come this evening. Involvement asks that such responses have an influence on the contact. If I am pleased only by what confirms my picture of good care, the other person easily becomes evidence for my own conviction.

Meanwhile, receiving help can be a very practical and tiring business. You must explain what you need, take others' availability into account and decide which advice to follow. Perhaps you postpone asking because you do not want to explain your whole situation again. A simple offer can make a difference: someone offering to bring groceries tomorrow and asking what should go on the list.

In an encounter, we have more ways to adjust. We may notice someone becoming quieter, although that does not yet tell us why. We can ask whether the conversation still fits. And we can hear that it has been enough. The other person also has a say in where the afternoon goes. Perhaps the television goes on, and at last there is something you can disagree about without difficulty.

The next time you meet, the question may come again: ‘Is it helping at all?’ There need be nothing wrong with it. There may be good news. There may be an answer you do not understand, or one you have heard before. You listen and try to discover what matters today. After a while, the other person mentions that the light in the hall is still broken. You ask where the new bulbs are kept.

4 Surrender and resistance

A letter lies on the table. Someone has read it for the third time and still does not know how to reply. It contains a decision that means a great deal for their life. They are angry. Across the table, someone suggests that perhaps they should accept it, for their own peace of mind.

It may be sensible advice. Some decisions will not change with another attempt. But it may also come too soon. Perhaps information is missing. Perhaps a mistake has been made. Perhaps that anger is how someone first clearly feels that something is wrong. Peace of mind is then not the only value at stake.

It is precisely here that the word surrender calls for care. Who says it, to whom, and with what consequences? A thought that brings relief within one's own experience can become, in another person's mouth, an encouragement to endure something. Especially when that other person is little affected by what must be accepted.

We can begin with the reality of this moment. The letter is here. The decision has been made. The anger exists. Acknowledging that says nothing yet about whether the decision is right or what someone can do next. It simply prevents us beginning the conversation from a situation other than the one that exists now.

Something then remains open. Someone can ask for information, seek support or decide not to take it further today. Sometimes nothing can change the decision, but something can change its consequences. Sometimes even that room is small. Reality rarely consists of two clearly separated compartments, with everything changeable on one side and everything fixed for ever on the other.

A body may have lasting limitations while symptoms can still be treated. A loss may be irreversible while the circumstances in which someone grieves make a great difference. You cannot rewrite a history, but you can choose who helps you speak about it. And sometimes you cannot make that choice alone, because money, health or available care limit the possibilities.

Acceptance soon becomes too large when it has to encompass a whole life at once. You must accept your past, your body, the loss and the uncertainty about the future. Who can judge whether someone has done so? In a particular moment, the question is often smaller. How is it today? What needs

attention? What can wait? Action can emerge from that, even while discontent remains.

This connection between making room for difficult experiences and continuing to act can also be found in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, usually called ACT. Psychological flexibility is central to the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science's description of this approach. Acceptance is connected with action towards chosen values. It is not a goal separate from the rest of life.[3]

This is an affinity with questions in this book, not an explanation of how the book works. ACT is a developed psychological approach with its own theory and methods. A listening story does not automatically incorporate them. The distinction does help us avoid equating acceptance with coming to a standstill. Making room for a feeling can go together with deciding to change something.

A parent can be afraid and still ask for better care for a child. Someone can feel sorrow and hold a conversation in which practical arrangements must be made. The feeling does not first have to disappear. It may also become so heavy that taking action is barely possible. Support then matters more than encouragement to take a step with the right attitude.

We sometimes say that you can always choose how to respond to something. That sentence contains a longing for freedom. There are moments when a small possibility becomes visible between a feeling and a response. But the word always can contain a harsh judgement. Someone who is overwhelmed does not automatically have access to everything that looks like a simple choice from outside.

The ability to choose needs supporting circumstances. Time can help. Someone who explains. Enough sleep, a safe environment, people taking over part of a task. Not all of these are available when we need them. Freedom is also something people can make possible for one another.

In the preface to Part III of his Ethics, Spinoza opposed the idea that human beings stand outside nature and have complete power over their actions. He wanted to understand feelings as phenomena belonging to nature.[4] This is a philosophical starting point, not a medical explanation. It does offer a question in response to how quickly we speak of weakness or a lack of will.

When we want to understand behaviour, we can look at the circumstances in which it arises. That does not remove responsibility. An outburst can hurt someone even if exhaustion and fear contributed to it. Understanding can help

make responsibility more concrete: what needs repairing, and what is needed to make a recurrence less likely?

Little is gained if gentleness erases every consequence. The person affected is then left with the damage. Equally little is gained by reducing someone to their worst moment. You can acknowledge that something should not have happened and explore what is needed to move forward differently. Both questions can have a place in the same conversation.

Sometimes that calls for resistance. A clear boundary. Someone saying that a way of treating a resident is inappropriate. A loved one continuing to ask what an institution will do about a problem. Such concern does not always sound calm. A person may stumble over words, become angry or find better words afterwards. The substance of a concern should not be judged solely by the calmness with which it was expressed.

A language of surrender that values only gentleness can easily lose sight of this. People must then stand up for themselves in the right tone first. Someone who has been hurt is given the additional task of presenting their discontent pleasantly. Care asks for more: listening to what someone says and, where needed, also setting limits on how people treat one another.

We can distinguish between anger itself and what someone does with it. Not all anger gives an accurate judgement of a situation. Not every intense reaction is justified. But neither must anger first be undone before a serious conversation can take place. It may reveal something left unnamed in a friendlier conversation.

Surrender can also become a word for exhaustion. Someone stops trying because all their strength is gone. That is not automatically a liberating moment or a deeper insight. It may be a situation in which they need more help. A book that describes only the beauty of letting go risks missing such a limit.

This subject therefore also requires acknowledging that sometimes a person can no longer see any prospect ahead. That feeling deserves serious attention and appropriate care. It need not be a conclusion about what is actually still possible. At such times, this book must not ask someone to understand their despair as surrender. Protection and help can come first.

For me, the word peace has room only when discontent is not excluded. A day can be painful. You can wish something were different and still do a few ordinary things within it. You can refuse to call a situation good while

acknowledging that it exists at this moment. Such relationships do not have to be neatly resolved before the day can continue.

Sometimes the struggle is not chosen. A memory presents itself and the body reacts. You wake with unease. It would be strange for a book seeking to reduce pressure immediately to add another assignment: now you must stop resisting. The wish for something to go away is also part of what someone experiences.

Today someone may simply say: I do not want this. That answer does not have to be led back towards acceptance. A thought about surrender remains useful to me only if it also leaves room on such a day.

There are also moments when a practical act says the most. You can change little about the uncertainty of a test result and still wait together. You cannot undo a loss, but you can make sure someone does not have to cook. You can still consider a decision unjust and put the letter in a folder for now, because the children will be home soon.

None of these acts makes the situation complete. They give shape to a next moment. Reading it again can wait until tomorrow. Other life may take place in the meantime.

5 Contributing within our capacity

‘And what do you do?’ It is an ordinary question when people get to know one another. Usually we mean work. The answer offers a first point of connection. You learn something about someone's days, education or interests. A conversation may grow from it that reaches far beyond an occupation.

For someone who does not work, the same question can be difficult. An explanation follows that says more about limitations than they wanted to share at that moment. Sometimes a life story is reduced to an absence: no job. What someone does do, what matters and how much an ordinary day asks of them remain out of sight.

I worked as a paver for many years. The work could bring pleasure and satisfaction. It also asked a great deal of my body and of what I was trying to sustain mentally. Financial responsibilities made stopping complicated. Being able to do something for a time did not automatically mean it suited my capacity in the longer term.

I now work in care and am studying. There I experience a form of connection that moves me. Reading aloud to someone who has few words is a concrete activity. There is a book; someone listens or responds in their own way. My attention goes towards the encounter. At the same time, the work brings time pressure and physical strain. Its meaning does not remove those limits.

I also recognise the wish for the obligation to do paid work to fall away. There can be peace in the thought that, with enough material security, I could contribute within my capacity. That is not an aversion to doing something for others. The distinction between wanting to contribute and continually having to meet expectations is precisely what needs attention for me.

A compliment can mean a great deal. Someone sees what you do. Your commitment is noticed. For someone who has long doubted their abilities, recognition can open a new possibility. We need not dismiss that as dependence on approval. People live with one another. How we see one another matters.

Tension arises, though, when appreciation mainly follows being able to do more. An extra shift, finishing a difficult task after all, remaining available while tired. The boundary between dedication and overload then becomes hard to see. What looks like strong commitment from outside may inwardly be a way of holding on to a position that barely fits any longer.

More counts here than the hours someone is present. There is preparation, tension beforehand and recovery afterwards. A working day can look short on paper and determine the rest of the day. A schedule that suits one person can cost another a great deal. You cannot see all of that in the work delivered during a shift.

When someone says they can no longer manage something, they should not first have to prove that they could never do it. Having done it for a long time can make acknowledging a limit especially difficult. You managed last month, didn't you? You are good at it. We need you. Those sentences may contain truth and still leave too little room for what is being said now.

The person stating a limit may continue to doubt it too. Is this really too much? Would someone else just carry on? Have I tried enough? A strong sense of responsibility can be present in that doubt. Sometimes support is needed so the question does not have to be answered so alone. Taking your own experience seriously and asking for advice can go together.

Capacity has several meanings here. It may mean a skill, energy or the circumstances that make something possible. Someone may be an excellent listener and still be unable to manage long shifts. Another may perform a task independently when it is presented clearly. Possibilities do not belong only to a person; they also arise in the relationship between that person and their environment.

Equal treatment therefore does not always mean having everyone do the same thing. An adjustment can make participation possible. More time, a different pace or help with one part. If we regard such support as a favour to someone who falls short, the assumption remains that the usual arrangement should naturally suit everyone.

Not everyone can be supported into paid work. Not every limitation can be accommodated by an adjustment. That, too, must be genuinely possible to say. Otherwise warm language about possibilities becomes another demand to prove useful in the end. Someone may need considerable support for a long time. Their place among people need not be made dependent on that.

Here this book touches on a conviction I want to defend: human dignity should not be measured by the amount of work someone can perform. That is an ethical choice. If dignity depends on productivity, illness or old age can also cost someone their claim to considerate treatment. I find that an untenable condition for how we treat one another.

This does not yet settle what each of us should contribute. A society needs people who work and carry burdens. Those who are able can be called upon to do so. The difficult question is how to ask for responsibility without overestimating someone's possibilities. Equal dignity does not remove that judgement; it limits what we may conclude about someone's worth from their efforts.

There is a risk that we then elevate every ordinary gesture into a contribution. That too can ask a great deal of someone. The ill person must at least inspire others. The resident must teach us something about pure contact. The older person must offer wisdom. By a roundabout route, dependence is once again required to yield something that justifies it.

Someone does not have to be a lesson for those around them. A resident can have a bad day, want little contact and teach others nothing. It still matters that they receive good care. That sometimes calls for ordinary, precise tasks that feel far from profound to the person carrying them out. Professional care does not have to become a special encounter every time.

Material security belongs among these questions. Someone who does not know whether they can keep their home or pay the next bill needs more than a different relationship with uncertainty. Practical support can change their possibilities. A conversation about self-worth does not pay the rent. It may help someone ask a question long left unspoken out of shame.

There is no simple solution to that shame. Support can bring relief and at the same time a feeling of being judged by what you cannot do. You can need assistance and want to be seen for your qualities. That is not contradictory. These are different sides of participating in a society where possibilities are unevenly distributed.

At the end of a day, there may be satisfaction in what you have done. There may also be disappointment because little went well. We do not have to talk that difference away. What succeeded may matter; what did not may have consequences. It simply need not lead to a judgement about a person's worth. Tomorrow we speak to that same person again, with more to discuss than today's output.

6 Giving and receiving care

Someone asks whether you can come over. You thought you had the evening free. You planned to stay home and do very little. Now, on the phone, you hear how difficult things are. You want to be there. As you say you will come soon, you also notice how tired you are.

Such moments rarely call for a general statement about love. They call for weighing things up. How is the other person? Is anyone else available? What can you manage yourself? Sometimes you go and are glad afterwards that you were there. Sometimes you say you cannot today and still feel guilty. That feeling does not automatically decide whether your choice was wrong.

Love and care are easily described in sweeping terms. Always being there. Being willing to do anything for someone. Never letting someone down. In a life with sleep, work and vulnerabilities of our own, those words must take a form. Someone who promises everything may eventually have little room left to say what is really possible.

A boundary can therefore also give a relationship information. I can listen this evening, but afterwards I need to sleep. I want to come with you, but I cannot take over every appointment. That may hurt the other person. A boundary does not automatically feel pleasant because it is necessary. Sometimes two people must live with the fact that what one needs and what the other can give do not fully match.

Additional support can make a difference: professional help, a friend taking something over or another division of tasks. But that help may be absent too. Needs then remain unmet, however carefully everyone acts. Stating a boundary can be necessary and still mean that someone spends that evening alone. That loss deserves acknowledgement, without obliging the helper to be endlessly available.

I have experienced how much love and attention can mean amid great unrest. Sometimes I longed for closeness to change something I found hard to bear myself. I can write about that longing. Other people's personal histories remain theirs.

There need be no blame at the beginning of this. People seek one another out because closeness matters. It becomes complicated when the other person becomes responsible for an inner state they cannot fully influence. A partner

can give you attention and you can still feel unsettled. They can love you deeply and need distance. You can understand that and feel sad about it.

Receiving asks something of us too. You let someone into what you cannot do. Perhaps you must wait for something you used to do yourself. You know the other person is busy and try to ask as little as possible. There may be gratitude, but also irritation at the dependence. You can welcome the help and wish it were unnecessary.

During physical illness and recovery, this becomes very concrete. Getting up, walking or sitting somewhere may no longer be straightforward. What you thought you could manage beforehand sometimes proves too much.

A limit then has little interest in your good intentions. You may want something very much and have to discover what support is needed at this moment.

I underwent back surgery and found myself in the position of receiving care. There was pain, and I kept track of how I was doing. What had seemed a manageable plan beforehand sometimes proved too much during recovery. Knowing that rest was needed did not make the limitation less real.

We cannot always wait for perfect attunement. Sometimes something needs doing. Making an appointment, helping someone to the toilet or bringing a meal. Ordinary professional skill and an attentive attitude meet. Too much talk about someone's feelings can itself become burdensome when they mainly want a practical task carried out properly.

Good care therefore also includes care that does not constantly draw attention to itself. Someone need not hear every time how special it is that they dare to receive help. Sometimes a glass of water is a glass of water. It is put down, someone drinks, and the conversation returns to yesterday's match.

Dependence can be present in an encounter without becoming its subject every minute. That makes room for other sides of a person. The patient has an opinion about music. The person receiving support makes a joke the carer understands too late. A relationship need not be organised entirely around the roles of giving and receiving.

At the same time, those roles are genuinely unequal. Someone providing care often has more influence over pace and actions. Equal worth does not mean pretending that difference is absent. It asks that the other person's wishes and boundaries remain important, even when they find it difficult to express what they want. Kindness does not undo power; power calls for careful use.

Care also raises the question of how to divide available time. Staying longer with one person can mean another must wait. Simply saying that the person comes first is then insufficient: there are several people. Urgency and safety count, as do agreements and what can be postponed. Sometimes a choice remains unsatisfactory. Good care then also asks that a recurring shortage be discussed, rather than one resident or staff member repeatedly absorbing it.

Care takes another form again in loss. From my own experience, I know how memories of someone who is absent can come unexpectedly close. They do not all mean the same thing. A person is no more a single, finished story in memory than during their life.

When someone is absent, there is often also love for which the usual acts are no longer possible. Calling, telling them something, asking how they are. A wish to share something can remain. How that finds a place varies. A photograph, an object, a thought while cooking. Sometimes it feels warm, sometimes mainly painful.

Those around someone may become unsure. Should we still mention the name? Is it all right to ask about a memory? Elapsed time cannot tell us what someone needs. A date that weighs heavily for one person passes almost unnoticed for another. Even within one life, that can differ from year to year.

In 1999, Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut described a model that understands grieving as a movement between attention to the loss and attention to the changed reality of everyday life. Temporary respite from these questions also had a place within it.[5] Their model provides no personal timetable for sorrow. It does help us examine the idea that someone must be constantly occupied with a loss to live with it carefully.

An unexpectedly difficult day need not prove that earlier good days were false. An afternoon when the absence is barely in the foreground can also be part of living with loss.

That makes words such as letting go complicated. What is to be let go of? An expectation, an object, the thought that things will be as they once were? Or is the suggestion that love itself should become less present? Until we know what someone means by that expression, we may easily offer advice about something other than what they are trying to tell us.

There is also the absence of people who are still alive. A friendship can fade, relatives may live far apart, and sometimes distance is needed to keep contact bearable. You can miss someone and still not seek to reconnect. A feeling does

not automatically oblige you to act. Love or longing alone does not decide what a wise next step would be.

Sometimes no next step resolves anything. Different needs or circumstances make the desired closeness impossible. It can then be hard not to judge the longing itself. You can long for something that is understandable and unavailable. Those two realities cannot always be reconciled.

Care thus exists at different distances. There is the person who accompanies you to a difficult appointment. Someone who sends a message now and then. A neighbour noticing that the curtains stay closed. We cannot all be everything for one another. Small forms of involvement can be real without expanding into a great promise.

On the phone, that may mean saying: I can come for half an hour now. The other person may be disappointed and still pleased you are coming. Nothing is settled for good about love or responsibility. You pick up your coat and ask whether you should bring bread on the way.

7 What words can open

A small change in language can do a great deal. Someone says you must accept something. A little later, someone else says they understand that you do not want it. The circumstances are the same. Yet the conversation may take another direction, because the second sentence asks something different of the person listening.

Words describe an experience and shape it at the same time. If I speak of a setback, I place a difficult day within a story about recovery. If I say someone is resisting, there seems to be a movement that person is holding back. Such words are sometimes useful. They may also carry an explanation we have not yet examined.

A word can thus know too soon what is happening. Take avoidance. Someone does not come to a gathering. Perhaps fear is making their life smaller and smaller. Perhaps they are exhausted and staying home is sensible. Perhaps they simply do not like these people. From outside, you see a cancellation. Its meaning is still open.

This does not call for language without judgement or interpretation. Such language scarcely exists. We must say something to understand one another. We can, however, notice when a description quietly becomes a conclusion. ‘He did not come’ says something different from ‘he is afraid to come’. The second sentence calls for a question: do we know that, and how do we know?

This matters when we speak about ourselves too. An unsuccessful attempt can be condensed into a trait. I am just someone who gives up. I cannot cope with pressure. Sometimes such a sentence describes a recognisable pattern. But the wording may also make the circumstances disappear. What pressure? How long did it last? Was there enough support? What did go well at other times?

You do not have to give a difficult experience a prettier name to speak about it more accurately. A day when little gets done may ask a great deal of someone. The word lazy does not necessarily describe that. Conversely, not every instance of procrastination is a sign of overload. Careful language makes room to investigate without choosing the most comfortable explanation in advance.

Acknowledgement has to do with that accuracy. A text in which someone recognises themselves need not understand their whole situation. Sometimes one detail is enough: the way a phone can remain silent, or the effort of saying

yet again that little has changed. A general statement about how hard life can be sometimes reaches less far than such a concrete moment.

A striking detail can make it seem as though the writer understands the rest as well. You recognise the opening and read on as though the explanation that follows must also describe you. Yet that recognition does not oblige you to agree with the rest of the argument.

This touches on how I address the listener. The word you brings someone close. It can also assume a great deal. You are tired. You have carried a lot. You long for peace. Some listeners recognise that. Another feels quite comfortable in themselves and only wanted a story. A third is angry and has little wish to be addressed as tired.

In the stories about life, I regularly use phrases such as you do not have to. They can name a particular pressure. You do not always have to be strong. You do not yet have to know how to go on. Encountering such a sentence can bring relief when much is being expected of you. The words are then responding to something.

But a great deal of permission in succession can itself create a relationship in which the narrator continually decides what the listener is allowed. You may be sad, you may move, you may feel nothing. Ordinary human freedom unintentionally takes the form of permission granted. It is worth seeing whether the text can also let that freedom exist without continually announcing it afresh.

A story can, for example, carry on while someone is distracted. Later it offers enough orientation to rejoin it. That contains a practical freedom which need not be described at length. A character can feel something complicated without the narrator explaining that such feelings are permissible. The telling itself then carries something that would otherwise repeatedly have to be said.

Words such as perhaps and sometimes have a task too. They can show that an experience is possible rather than a universal truth. When every sentence begins with them, however, language loses strength. The writer then seems hesitant even about the simplest observation. The art is knowing where uncertainty belongs in the substance and where one can simply say what happens in the story.

A window is open. A train travels through the evening. Someone puts down a mug. Such sentences need not carry an exception with them. As soon as I describe how the reader will feel as a result, my position changes. I leave the

visible setting and make a statement about someone I cannot see. More restraint belongs there.

The form of a text can also direct us. Many short lines give emphasis to almost every word. That may sound pleasant aloud and become solemn on paper. A series of reassuring sentences easily acquires an untouchable quality. It sounds as though every line is an insight before which you ought to fall silent. Ordinary speech can offer a counterweight.

A continuous paragraph has a different rhythm. A thought can begin hesitantly, explore something and change along the way. Readers have time to follow connections. There need not be a feeling after every sentence that something important has been said. A book may also simply explain clearly why a question is difficult.

Humour can help, provided it is not deployed on demand to lighten what is heavy. People can laugh at something trivial in the middle of a difficult situation. That need not prove resilience. A remark was funny. Later, sorrow may be present again. The conversation need not choose which experience was truer.

The same applies to beauty. A text can sound pleasant or evoke an image someone likes to keep. It needs no problem to soften in order to do so. When we approach all literature through what it can do for vulnerability, we also limit the pleasure of reading. Someone may simply love a well-chosen word.

Yet beautiful writing does not guarantee careful writing. A lovely image can carry too large a promise. A painful loss becomes a passageway; a wound becomes a gift. The language can become so seductive that readers barely notice the meaning being offered to them. Then the beautiful sentence in particular deserves a second reading.

I therefore want to ask whether an image makes something visible or resolves an experience from outside. An empty chair can make absence concrete. A sentence then explaining what wisdom will grow from that absence takes a much greater step. That step may belong to someone's own story. It does not automatically belong to every reader who knows an empty chair.

There is also nothing wrong with a thought that clearly takes a position. This book defends, for example, the view that someone's dignity does not depend on their achievements. That is no neutral description. I think it matters that the conviction is visible and can be discussed. A tone of equality does not mean a writer may take no position.

Readers' freedom also lies in being able to disagree, ask questions or find the reasoning insufficient. That is why the book needs more than reassurance. It must show why something is proposed, what consequences a thought has and where it may fall short. Warmth can coexist with disagreement.

Sometimes a text fails at this. A reader feels addressed in a way they did not want. A passage turns out mainly to fit the maker's intention. It is then useful to look back. Which words assumed too much? What was unnecessary? There is no need to find an explanation for why the reader was not open to it.

Ultimately, a book is also read in surroundings the writer does not determine. Between appointments. In a house where someone calls out. In bed as concentration fades. One sentence may linger while the rest is forgotten. This too is how language enters a life. It finds a place its maker cannot map out.

8 A place to stay for a while

There is a chair by a window. Outside is a garden. Water flows along a wall. A lamp glows in the room and evening slowly falls. Little more needs to happen for a setting to emerge where someone can linger in thought.

Such elements recur in The Window above the Garden. The tree remains visible as the light changes. The fire burns lower. Across the way, there is an occasional movement behind a window. A thought about something from today receives brief attention. Then the water can be heard again. The story lets the thought rest without declaring that it has disappeared.[6]

This movement differs from a story exploring a human question. There, it helps to follow the tension and examine different sides. In an imaginative rest story, a long explanation may push the setting into the background instead. The room becomes scenery for the writer's message. Everything in it is given a task.

Yet a chair can simply be available. A bowl on the windowsill need not become a symbol of abundance. Light falls on earthenware. That may be enough to look at for a moment. Once the narrator explains every object, little remains for listeners to discover for themselves or leave unnoticed.

In that sense, imagination also offers distance from one's own story. A garden does not ask how things are going now. A train need not know why someone is tired. Of course memories and feelings can come along. But they need not be the constant subject to be allowed a place within the same listening experience.

There can be pleasure in a world that continues to exist simply. The lamp stands where it stood. The train travels on. You miss a few sentences and still know roughly where you are. That is a choice in the form of the story. In itself, it says nothing about effects on sleep, tension or health.

The word safe also calls for restraint. A house by the sea may sound comforting to one person and hold little appeal for another. Silence may be welcome or make loneliness felt. One person may enjoy a fire while another would rather not hear warmth described. A maker can offer a setting but cannot know all its personal meanings.

A warning need not follow every image. That would ask so much attention for possible exceptions that the setting could barely emerge. Care can also show

in the choice of clear situations, few insistent instructions and room not to follow an image. The listener remains in the place where they actually are.

That last point matters. A story can speak of a blanket in an imagined room while someone at home decides to open their own window. The action in the story and the actual body need not move together. Someone may listen with open eyes, walk about or have little wish for bodily instructions. The story need not take over that freedom.

People also differ in what forms inwardly as they listen. Not everyone sees clear images. In 2015, Adam Zeman, Michaela Dewar and Sergio Della Sala described people reporting little or no voluntary visual imagery; they used the term aphantasia.[7] Their account reminds us of a difference writers easily forget: what seems an obvious part of imagining to me need not be so for someone else.

For these stories, that leads to a modest editorial choice. They should also be possible to follow when someone mainly experiences words, rhythm or a sense of the setting. A clear inner film is not an entry requirement. That does not tell us whether a particular listener enjoys them. That remains their own experience.

Details have a measure too. A few connected things can make a place recognisable. Too many colours, smells and objects ask someone to keep track of them. The room then becomes an inventory. A story in which little happens can still become busy in this way. The amount of description deserves as much attention as the number of events.

Repetition can offer orientation. The same sound becomes audible again after attention has been elsewhere. Yet returning need not become a fixed formula. If every passage ends with the same reassurance, the story mainly repeats its intention. A window can come into view again because it is darker outside. The setting then carries the change itself.

Time is a simple given here. An evening can slowly become night. A cloud moves. A lamp across the way goes out. There is movement without a mystery needing to be solved. Someone who drifts away for a moment misses no essential clue to the ending. Meanwhile the world has changed a little, just as a garden outside a real window continues when you are not looking.

A slightly fairytale castle can invite wonder. An old train can offer a pleasant world of sound. There is a place for the pleasure of invention. The scenery need not keep growing larger for that.

A funny detail may fit too. Something small and unexpectedly recognisable. But a story designed for sleep or drifting thoughts asks for something different from one building towards a punchline. Preparing a joke asks for attention to what is coming. That can be excellent in another kind of text. The story's purpose helps us choose.

There is no obligation always to stay with what is difficult. Distraction can be welcome. You can grow tired of thinking about what occupies you. Hearing for a while about a place unrelated to your situation can be pleasant. That need not immediately be explained as denial or as a step towards working things through. It may be an hour in which you were interested in something else.

At the same time, an offered landscape can land badly when someone wants to say something. Imagine beginning to speak about a sad day and the other person immediately putting on a calming story. It may feel as though the conversation is being taken away. A story is one possibility within contact; it cannot determine in advance what contact is needed at that moment.

Sometimes the value lies in a very small part. A sentence spoken pleasantly. The sound of water remaining briefly in the imagination. Perhaps in the fact that someone tells something without haste. No greater insight has to follow. Beauty and enjoyment need not prove their worth through a change in the listener.

An imagined place may eventually find a very ordinary place within a day. Alongside the washing still hanging, the traffic outside and the thoughts that sometimes return. The story need not erase that world. A room made of words has been added. When the last sentence has sounded, the real window remains where it was.

9 What may remain open

There are questions people can dwell on for a long time. Who are we beyond our name and the roles we fulfil? What does consciousness mean? Does anything continue after death? The books I keep offer different answers. Sometimes they contradict one another. I can still find something in them I enjoy reading.

Sometimes it is possible to live together with an unresolved difference. One person prays; the other does not. Someone speaks of a soul, another of memories passed on. They can still help one another move house, listen to one another or grieve together. Not every difference must first be reduced to a shared language.

A conviction can change within one life too. A thought that once carried a great deal becomes less important. A familiar answer raises new questions. That need not mean someone was dishonest before or has now developed further. Sometimes experience has taken another shape. Sometimes there is more information. Sometimes someone simply no longer knows what they believe.

We easily turn such changes into a journey with a right direction. From certainty to doubt, or from searching to trust. The telling can give coherence in retrospect. It can also suggest that the person still doubting is on their way towards the narrator's answer. Openness then acquires a destination after all.

The same applies to hope. We like to speak of it as a force that carries people. Sometimes it is. You long for something and it moves you to act. You try to restore a conversation. You seek a possibility not yet explored. The future is uncertain, and precisely because of that there is something to hope for.

Hope can also become tiring. Another appointment needs preparation. A possibility opens and closes again. You want to believe this will make a difference and fear the next disappointment. Someone may need support that does not continually kindle hope. Perhaps they first want to say how much it costs to begin again.

Reality can also change without our knowing what that means for hope. The news is better than expected and someone remains afraid. A possibility falls away and there is unexpected relief. Feelings do not always follow the direction of the facts. A change sometimes needs time to become a real part of a life.

Another person therefore cannot fully determine what you should still hope for. They can give information, help weigh possibilities or express concerns. But the longing itself has a personal meaning. Even when something does not happen, it was not necessarily wrong to have hoped for it. You longed for something important. The future made no promise about it.

Sometimes hope is absent. That may be a passing feeling, a lasting heaviness or a situation in which appropriate help is urgently needed. A writer cannot make that distinction for every reader at a distance. What the writer can do is avoid attaching an elevated meaning to the absence of any prospect. No hidden wisdom needs to be found in a moment when someone mainly needs support.

At the same time, a life that does not clearly improve deserves a place in our attention. Otherwise we mainly keep speaking with people whose story can be told as recovery. We ask what someone learned, how they became stronger and what they are grateful for now. Someone may be sitting opposite us who wants to say none of those things.

What is difficult can remain difficult. There can be contact without relief. It is then tempting to look for a small gain after all. You did eat. You are here. Sometimes such a remark is welcome; sometimes it asks again that someone judge their day more positively.

The word surrender remains useful to me when it leaves room for life to continue. There may be a moment when the constant assignment to solve something becomes less insistent. Someone goes outside, calls a friend or spends a while doing something else. That can matter. It need not become a state that must then be preserved.

I do not know whether every person has an untouchable essence. I may have a feeling about it, an image or a thought that appeals to me. This book does not need the reader to share it. Someone may arrive at the same wish to treat others carefully from a very different understanding of human beings.

An encounter need not always go deep, either. Two people can sit side by side with little interest in the meaning of life. They discuss a leaking tap, a neighbour or tomorrow's food. Ordinary conversation is not a lower level we must transcend to have real contact.

Afterword

When I began collecting words, I was looking for something to hold on to amid unease. I wanted to be able to reread what had given me something. Later came texts and stories of my own. Writing this book has not neatly concluded that search. There are still questions and experiences that do not fit a clear conclusion.

Something has been shared, though. Thoughts about what it means to live while not everything is resolved. About the care we give and receive, the value we attach to work and the freedom words can leave. These are subjects another person can continue thinking about from a very different life.

I notice gratitude in myself where heaviness often used to be in the foreground. That is something I can experience now. It does not make my past necessary or give me a route map for someone else. I want to be able to share it without someone elsewhere in life having to see a destination in it.

There are also experiences I have not told in this book. About my own life and the people important within it. A personal starting point does not require everything to become public. What I share may make something recognisable; what remains untold keeps its own place.

Ordinary life continues from here. With possibilities, with difficulty and with things that call for no reflection. Perhaps there is a message you still want to answer. A person you love to see. Or an evening you would rather spend quietly.

The book may close here.

Sources and the making of this book

This book connects personal experiences, ethical choices and reflections on language and life. The sources consulted support specific passages. They do not provide scientific evidence for the effectiveness of De Vrede van Overgave or the effects of these stories. A theoretical model, an account of a practice and an empirical study have different statuses here.

1 Carl Rogers on the therapeutic relationship

Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. Journal of Consulting Psychology, 21(2), 95–103. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0045357

Used in Chapter 3 for Rogers's theoretical proposal about acceptance, empathic understanding and the importance of the client experiencing something of them. The connection with everyday conversations is the author's reflection, not a proven application outside therapy.

2 Stichting Presentie on attunement and action

Stichting Presentie. Wat is presentie? [What is presence?] https://www.presentie.nl/wat-is-presentie/ Consulted on 26 October 2026.

Used in Chapter 3. The description of relational work, attunement, practical action and professional skill is drawn from the foundation's own explanation. No claims about effectiveness are adopted. A recorded story cannot attune itself personally to a listener; it is not equated here with practising the presence approach.

3 Acceptance and action in ACT

Association for Contextual Behavioral Science. The Six Core Processes of ACT. https://contextualscience.org/six_core_processes_act Consulted on 26 October 2026.

Used in Chapter 4 for the connection between acceptance, psychological flexibility and action according to chosen values. This is the professional association's description of the approach. De Vrede van Overgave is not presented as a form of ACT. Evidence for a treatment would, moreover, not be evidence for these stories.

4 Spinoza on feelings as natural phenomena

Spinoza, B. de (1677). Ethics, Part III, preface. Consulted in the English translation by R. H. M. Elwes, The Ethics, via Project Gutenberg, e-book 3800. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm

Used in Chapter 4 for a limited philosophical starting point: human beings do not stand outside nature, and feelings deserve examination rather than condemnation alone. This does not adopt Spinoza's entire philosophy. The passage does not explain an individual's psychological or physical symptoms.

5 Stroebe and Schut on coping with bereavement

Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. Death Studies, 23(3), 197–224. https://doi.org/10.1080/074811899201046

Used in Chapter 6 for the proposed movement between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented attention, with room for temporary respite. The article formulates a model and discusses the need for further testing. The model is not used as a standard for someone's individual course of grieving, or to substantiate an account of every other kind of loss.

6 The Window above the Garden

Harkema, M. Het raam boven de tuin [The Window above the Garden], from the series Tot rust komen [Coming to Rest]. Supplied reading text and collection of six rest stories, made available on 26 October 2026.

Chapter 8 discusses the form of this text by the author. The explanation of the alternation between setting and thought is an editorial reading. The rhythm described is not a demonstrated mechanism of action. The initiative and current stories can be found at https://devredevanovergave.nl/

7 Differences in inner imagery

Zeman, A., Dewar, M., & Della Sala, S. (2015). Lives without imagery — Congenital aphantasia. Cortex, 73, 378–380. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2015.05.019

Used in Chapter 8 for the existence of differences in reported voluntary visual imagery. The publication describes 21 self-selected individuals and therefore has limitations. It supports no claim about the appreciation or effects of these listening stories. Seeking to make them accessible without clear inner images is an editorial choice.

Personal sources

This book draws on personal experiences, original texts and explanations provided by Matthijs Harkema. His other books and listening stories also form part of its background. Not all personal experiences are shared again here.

The making of this book

This manuscript was developed in conversations with Matthijs Harkema. OpenAI's ChatGPT was used as a writing and editing partner in exploring, organising and formulating the material. The personal experiences come from the author. Everyday situations are imagined examples; they are not drawn from confidential conversations or identifiable clients. This is a personal publication. Mention of volunteering with De Luisterlijn implies no involvement, approval or recommendation by that organisation.

Personal passages describe experiences and contain no established causal explanation of the author's life history. The book offers reflection and narrative company. It does not replace professional care.

How can we keep one another company when life offers no clear answer?

In *Company Along the Way*, Matthijs Harkema explores what words, attention and imagination can mean amid unease, vulnerability and uncertainty. Drawing on personal experience, he reflects on helping and receiving, work and dignity, love and dependence.

Existence may remain a mystery. Thoughts are explored, convictions stay open to discussion, and ordinary life is given room too.

A personal book inviting readers to think along, recognise something or stay with a story for a while.

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