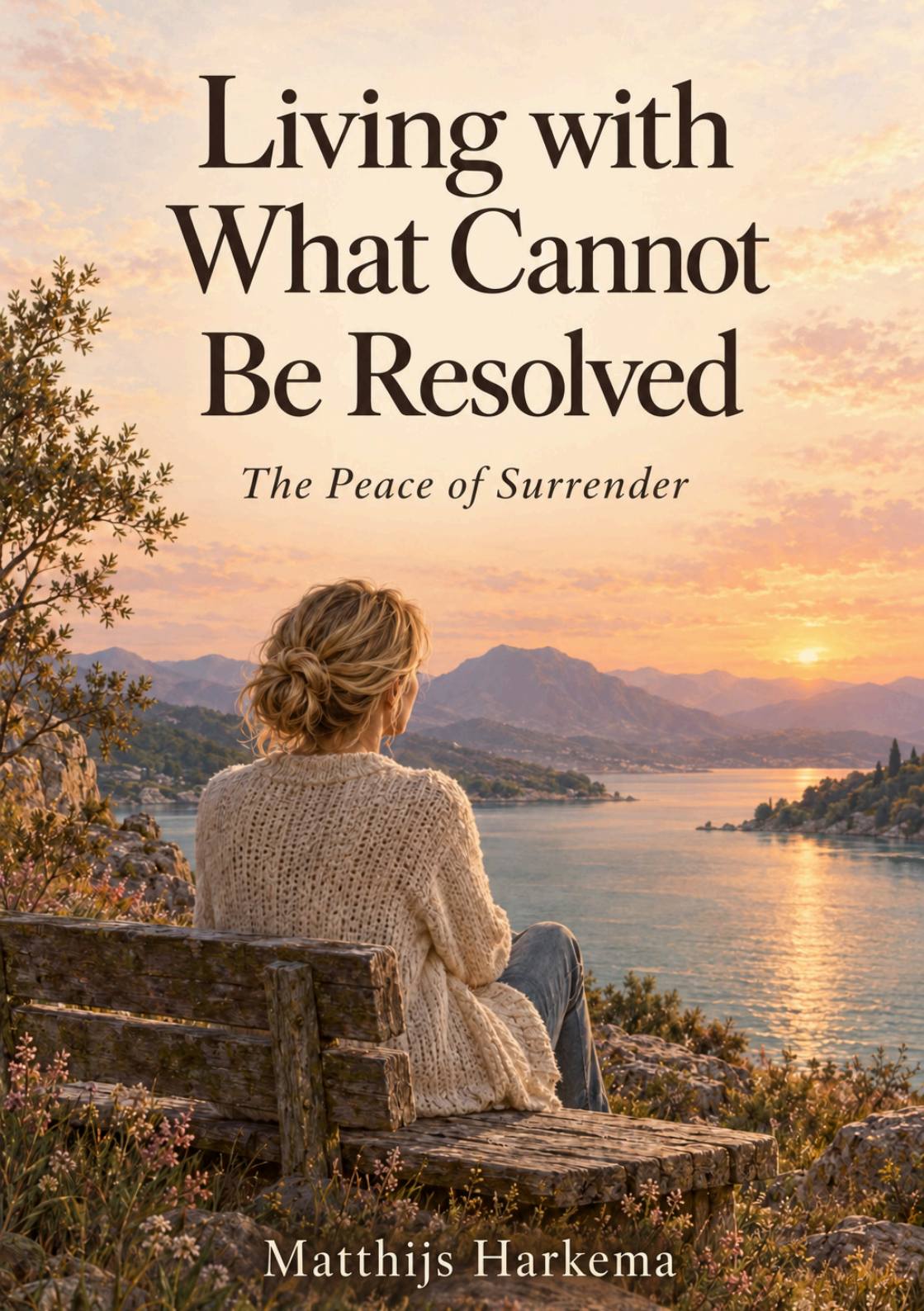
Living with What Cannot Be Resolved

The Peace of Surrender



Matthijs Harkema

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Personal reflections on inner turmoil, loss, love and the space that can remain in a human life.

About This Book

This book draws on personal experience, reading and listening. It explores how to live with what cannot be resolved.

At the back are responses I received to individual chapters.

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Foreword

Perhaps we have become accustomed to the idea that there must be an answer to almost everything. When something hurts, we want to know how it will pass. When we are sad, we wonder how we can become happy again. When a relationship changes, someone passes away, our body no longer does what it used to, or life simply turns out differently than we had hoped, we almost automatically look for a way out. What should I do? How do I get over this? When will things be like they used to be? Sometimes these are important questions.

There are things that can be changed. There are conversations that need to be had, boundaries that may be set, and situations in which seeking help might be the bravest thing anyone can do. But there is also another part of life. A part that no longer negotiates with us. What is done is done. Someone we have lost will not come back because we miss them enough. Time cannot be turned back. Another person cannot be held. Our bodies change. Children grow up.

Some questions never receive the answer we had hoped for. And yet we live on. That is where the question that occupied me while writing begins: how do you live when not everything turns out well?

For me, that question was not just a thought. For a long time, I searched for ways to understand and change a persistent inner turmoil. I sought help, tried various forms of treatment and guidance, meditated, worked hard, and sometimes sought peace in change or freedom. Some things truly helped. Others less so. Much of it taught me

something. However, that did not make everything that felt heavy disappear.

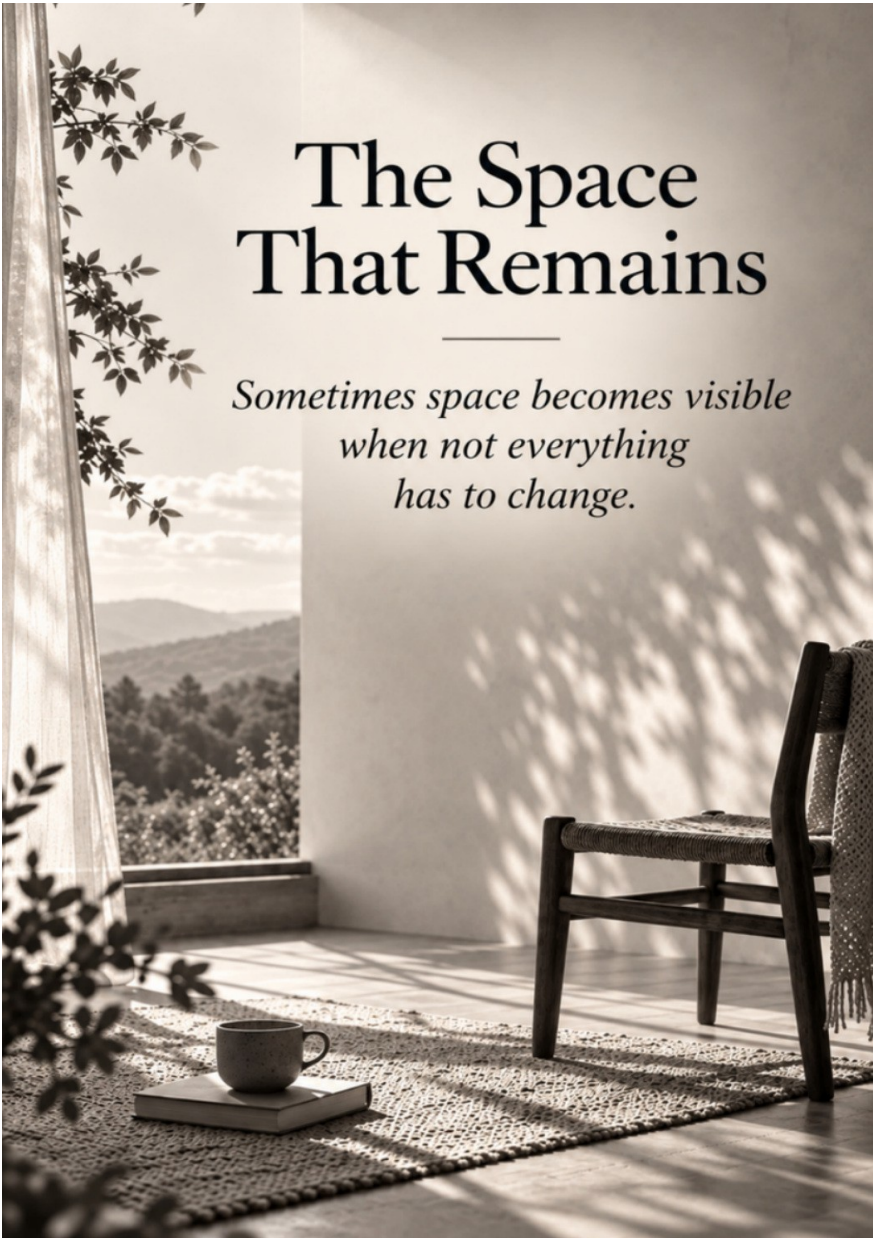
Slowly, a second question emerged alongside it: can my life also be lived while not everything within me has been resolved? This book explores that question through personal experience and reflection. It offers no treatment or method for reducing symptoms. What feels familiar here may be different for someone else. Help, safety and change still have their place.

That is roughly what I mean by surrender: acknowledging what is true in this moment without approving of it. Injustice remains injustice. Pain need not have served any good purpose. Sometimes life calls for help, a boundary, protest or leaving. Acknowledgement does not stand in the way of such action.

And sometimes there are only the words: this hurts. I miss someone. I do not know. I cannot manage today. Without having to know the next sentence immediately.

Sometimes I recognize something of peace in that. Not permanent calm, but a moment when something else can also be felt alongside what is difficult. A walk. A conversation in which someone is not trying to make you better. A hand. A cup of coffee. A person who says: I am here.

This book is about love and sorrow, about the past and the space it occupies today. About people we lose and people who stay. About growing older, mortality and the need to find someone beside us when life is difficult. It does not seek to point to a destination. A little company along the way is enough. Feel free to sit down for a while.


The Space
That Remains
Sometimes space becomes visible
when not everything
has to change.

The Space That Remains

Some things in life can still change. A conversation can still take place. A decision can be reversed. You can leave somewhere. Begin again. Ask for help. Choose a different path. And then there are things for which no new attempt exists. It happened. Perhaps you know exactly what that moment was for you. A telephone call. A diagnosis. A door that closed. Someone who said they did not want to go on. A goodbye you did not yet know was a goodbye. Or something much smaller, something that seems insignificant to everyone else but to which you still return regularly.

We keep replaying and revising scenes long after reality has moved on. In our minds, we conduct conversations that will never take place. We make ourselves prosecutor, witness, and the one being condemned, all at once. In the shower. In bed at night. In the car. We think of what we should have said. This time, we do answer. Better. More sharply. Or more gently. That is deeply human. For when something hurts, we want to be able to do something with it. Taking action gives us the feeling that we are not powerless. But somewhere, that ability reaches a boundary. Yesterday does not listen. You can speak to it. You can curse it. You can return to it every night. But yesterday will not change its mind.

That sounds almost too simple. Of course we know it. No one needs to explain to us that the past is over. And yet knowing something intellectually can be entirely different from truly allowing it in. You can know that a relationship is over and still expect a message for a moment each morning. You can know that someone has died and suddenly, in the

supermarket, want to pick up something you know they liked. You can know that your body has changed and still be startled each time something that once came naturally no longer works. Reality may already have arrived while part of us is still on its way. Perhaps we do not need to hurry that part along.

We are often told that we must let things go. But how do you actually do that? As though somewhere inside us there were a hand we need only open. Let it go. Move on. Accept it. Small sentences for something that can sometimes take years. Perhaps letting go is not always the best place to begin. Sometimes it begins instead with seeing what you are still trying to hold on to. Not to catch yourself out. Simply to notice. Perhaps you are not even holding on to the event itself. Perhaps you are holding on to the possibility that things might still have been different. That someone will finally understand what they did to you. That an apology will come. That a doctor will say the result was wrong after all. That someone will return. That you will wake up one morning and once again be the person you used to be. Hope can carry us. But sometimes hope can also turn toward a door that can no longer open. And then the question becomes painful: how long must you keep knocking? Perhaps there is no universal answer. Sometimes a door everyone believed to be closed does open again. People recover. Relationships find their way back to one another. Treatments work. Circumstances change. That is why we should be cautious when telling another person that something must be “accepted”.

We do not always know which door is truly closed. And it is certainly not for us to decide when someone else should stop hoping. But sometimes you know it yourself. Very

quietly, perhaps. Beneath all the thoughts, bargaining and longing, you know: this part will not change. Perhaps surrender begins there. Not with: It is good. But with: It is so. Those are two entirely different sentences. Acknowledging that something happened does not mean approving of it. That distinction matters. For sometimes the things people have to learn to live with are not good at all. A loss does not become good because eventually you can carry it. Injustice does not become just because you continue with your life. What someone did to you does not become less wrong because you decide it should not be the first thing you think about every morning. You do not have to make your pain more beautiful in order to be allowed to live with it.

There need not be a lesson in it either. Sometimes someone finds meaning afterward, but there is no obligation to emerge stronger from pain. You may have become more vulnerable or cautious instead. Even then, you have not suffered incorrectly. You may say: I wish this had never happened. And later, if those words fit: but it did happen. A great deal of time can lie between those sentences.

We sometimes overestimate how much freedom a person has. Not everything is a choice. You do not choose where you are born. You do not choose whom you lose. You do not choose every illness. You do not choose what other people do to you. You do not choose which memory suddenly appears tonight. Even what happens within us does not always obey us. Try, on command, not to be afraid. Or not to miss someone. Or not to think about the very thing you absolutely do not want to think about. Apparently, that is not how a human being works.

And yet powerlessness is rarely complete. Even when there is little we can determine, sometimes something remains. Not always a momentous choice. Perhaps only the next few minutes. Do I get up, or remain lying down? Do I answer the phone? Do I send that message now, while I am furious, or wait until tomorrow? Do I finally tell someone that I am not doing well? Do I go outside today? Take my medication? Make that appointment? Or do I acknowledge that today I no longer need to prove anything and go to bed early?

Freedom can lie in such small movements. You are afraid and call someone while you are afraid. You miss someone and decide not to stay alone with that absence today. But even that space is not always within reach. Someone who is overwhelmed or exhausted may find little use in a choice that looks simple to an outsider.

You can always choose how you respond can then become a harsh sentence. Sometimes support is needed first: a friend, a doctor, a therapist or someone who offers practical help. Someone who keeps a little space open when you cannot find it yourself.

Alongside what hurts, a judgment about that pain may appear. I should be further along. I am ashamed of my fear. I miss someone and think it has been long enough by now. That can make something already heavy even heavier.

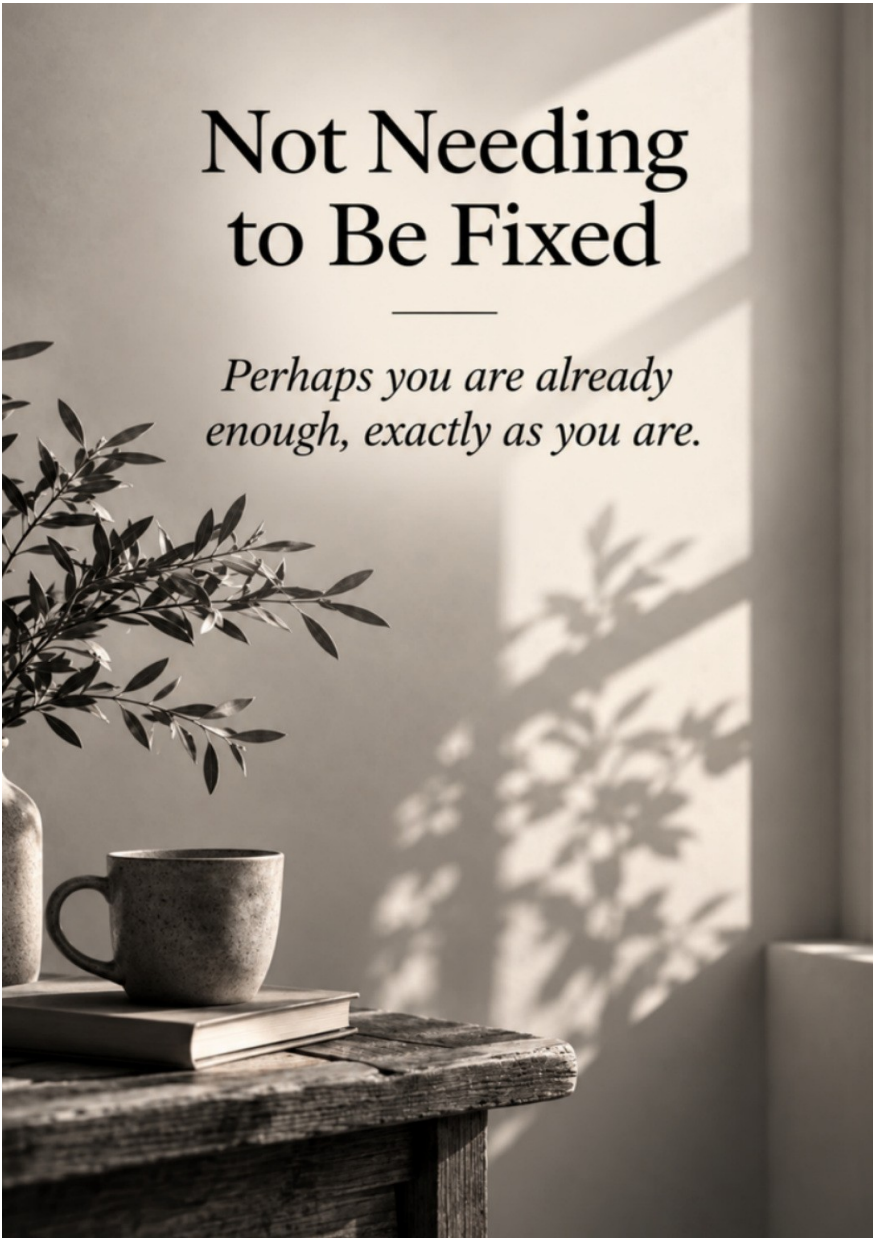
You can notice that judgment without immediately being given a new assignment to be kinder. Today it hurts. Today I am angry. Today I do not know. We do not have to predict the rest of our lives from this Tuesday afternoon.

Imagine walking through a landscape with a heavy backpack. You did not pack it yourself. Some things were put into it by others along the way; other things simply

belong to the journey. Perhaps there is no way to take everything out. Then the question changes. Not: How do I get rid of this backpack? But: How can I walk with it without becoming nothing but the backpack? Perhaps you rest more often, let someone carry it for part of the way, or remove what can be removed. Some things remain inside and continue to weigh.

Meanwhile, there is also a landscape. The backpack has not disappeared. There is simply more than the backpack. Perhaps you recognize this in memories.

At first, a single event can fill almost the entire room. Wherever you look, it is there. You walk around it. You bump into it. Every conversation eventually seems to lead back to it. Later, something sometimes changes. Not because the event becomes smaller, but because the room becomes larger. Other things enter it. People. Work. A new morning. A journey. A friendship. A song you did not know before. A child growing older. A table at which, suddenly, someone else is sitting. New memories. And somewhere in that larger room, what happened is still there. Sometimes you bump into it again. Then it hurts unexpectedly as much as it did before. That does not necessarily mean that you are back at the beginning. Sometimes there is no such thing as being back at the beginning. By now, you are also someone who has lived all the days since that event. Those days count too.


Not Needing to Be Fixed
Perhaps you are already enough, exactly as you are.

Not Needing to Be Fixed

There are conversations in which, after only a few minutes, you notice that someone wants to help you. That can be deeply loving. You say that you have not been feeling quite yourself, and the other person begins looking for possibilities. Have you tried getting more exercise? Perhaps you should talk to someone. You should not think about it too much. Get away for a while. Try to let it go. You know it is well meant. Sometimes the advice is even sensible. And yet something can happen that makes you gradually say less. Not because you do not want to be helped. But because perhaps, at first, you needed something else. For someone to remain for a moment with what you had said. Without haste. Without immediately looking for a way out. Simply: Tell me.

We have become rather good at solving things. If a tap leaks, we repair it. If the car makes a strange noise, we take it to the garage. If a computer freezes, we restart it. Problem. Cause. Solution. That way of thinking is extraordinarily useful. A large part of our world could not function without it. But people are not leaking taps. Even so, we sometimes approach one another as though we were. There is sadness. How do we make it go away? There is fear. What helps against it? There is loneliness. Then you need to spend more time with people. There is doubt. Make a choice. There is grief. Give it time. We listen to someone's story, and somewhere halfway through, our mind is already searching for tools. Perhaps because we want to help. But perhaps also because it is difficult to sit beside something for which we have no solution. Another person's sadness can leave us feeling powerless. And powerlessness is

uncomfortable. So we do something. We offer advice. Put things into perspective.

Tell them about someone who went through the same thing. Look for the positive. Or say that curious sentence almost everyone has heard at some point: It will be all right. But what if we simply do not know that? Suppose someone is sitting opposite you who has just learned that a loved one is seriously ill. What are you supposed to say? Or think of parents who know that, because of a profound disability, their child will remain dependent on care for life. Their love may be great, and so may their sorrow. Added to this may be worries about health, the future, and the quality of the care on which their child depends. Some things do not somehow become all right when someone learns to live with them more easily. Perhaps closeness can begin by not asking a parent to make it sound more beautiful, lighter, or more worthy of gratitude than it is for them.

Perhaps we search for words because silence feels so vast. We want to offer something. Hope. Comfort. A perspective. But sometimes the right words simply do not exist. Then, “I don't know what to say” may be more honest than, “I'm sure it will be all right”. And perhaps something very simple can happen after that. You stay. It sounds almost like nothing. But staying is not nothing. When someone is in pain that you cannot take away, your presence may be one of the few things you can truly give. Not: I will make this better. But: You do not have to sit here entirely alone. Perhaps we underestimate how much difference that can make.

Truly listening is more difficult than being silent while someone else speaks. You can remain completely quiet and barely listen at all. Perhaps you are occupied with your reply. With your own story. With the clock. With what you

need to do later. Or with the question of how to make this conversation a little lighter again. Listening asks something unusual of us: that, for a while, your world is not at the center. That you do not immediately decide what the other person's story means. Someone says, “I am so tired.” Perhaps they mean they need sleep. Perhaps he means his work. Perhaps she means life itself. Perhaps they do not yet know exactly what they mean. We can ask: “What do you mean?” But even such a simple question can disappear when we think too quickly that we already understand.

We easily fill things in for each other. Someone tells us something and a memory from our own life appears: I have been through that too. But the same situation can be experienced differently. Two people can receive the same diagnosis and lose different things. Two children can grow up in the same family and remember different childhoods. Having experienced something similar does not yet tell us what this is like for the other person.

Perhaps meeting someone therefore begins with a small uncertainty: I do not yet know what this is like for you. Tell me. There is something gentle in a person who does not immediately form a judgment. Not because everything must be considered acceptable. That is something else. You can take someone seriously and still say that certain behavior is not acceptable. You can try to understand why someone is furious without condoning violence. You can see that someone is afraid and still set a boundary. You can love someone and refuse to allow them to harm you. Understanding and boundaries do not need to be enemies. Sometimes understanding becomes more valuable precisely when it is not cheap approval. I am trying to understand what is happening within you. That does not mean:

Everything you do is right. It means only that, to me, you do not stop being human as soon as things become complicated. That sounds simple. Until someone tells you something with which you fundamentally disagree. Then listening becomes more difficult. You may feel the urge to correct them. To explain.

To put the facts on the table. Sometimes that is necessary. But sometimes it helps to remain for just one question longer. Not: “How can you possibly think that?” But: “What makes this so important to you?” That is not agreement. It is curiosity. And curiosity can keep something open that judgment closes at once.

That can happen at home too. Someone comes in irritated. You hear the tone, feel attacked and respond. Within a minute, the conversation is no longer about what happened but about the way you are speaking to each other. A question such as you sound angry, what is going on? can sometimes offer a different beginning.

We do not always manage that. We have bad days, hunger, headaches and old irritations of our own. Sometimes we respond in exactly the way we had resolved not to. You do not have to be perfectly present to make contact.

Perhaps, in the end, people do not long only for someone who listens to their words. We long for somewhere we can appear without continually having to present a better version of ourselves. That is something different. We all know places where an automatic answer follows the question: “How are you?” Good. Busy. Fine. And you? Usually there is nothing wrong with that. Not every conversation at the bakery needs to be about our deepest fears. But it becomes lonely when there is nowhere where

the other answer may also be heard. “Not that well, actually.” And where that does not immediately cause panic. No: “Oh dear, what is wrong?” Perhaps only: “Would you like to tell me about it?” That small phrase, would you like to, does a great deal. You do not have to. You do not have to explain your sadness. You do not have to share your inner world simply because someone shows interest. Silence, too, may be an answer. Perhaps safety consists partly in knowing that you are allowed to say something without being obliged to say it.

There is another side as well. Listening cannot carry everything. Sometimes someone needs more than a conversation. When someone is seriously ill, presence is not a substitute for medical care. When psychological pain becomes unbearable, professional help may be necessary. When someone is unsafe, taking action may be more important than sitting quietly. Where violence is taking place, understanding never has to mean that someone should stay. Closeness is not an alternative to help. Sometimes closeness can say precisely this: You do not have to solve this alone. Let us see who else can come and stand beside you. That is not repair either. It is acknowledging that some burdens are too heavy to hold with only two hands.

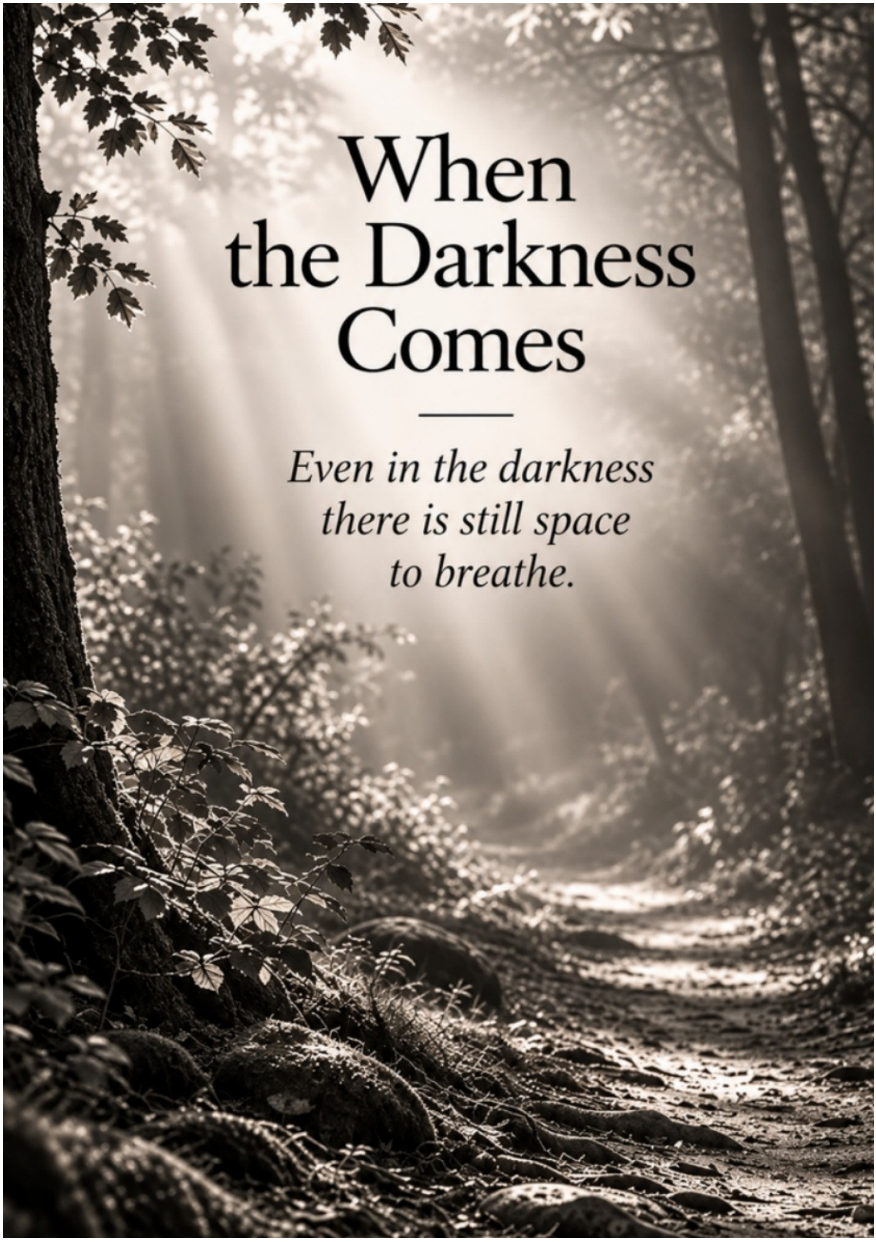
It can feel good to be welcome somewhere without having to change first. Whether something grows from that remains open. Being present is not a technique for getting the other person to change after all. A question such as what would you like to be different? only becomes meaningful when the answer I do not know is also allowed to stand.

And perhaps that also applies to ourselves. We can treat ourselves as though we were a project that ought finally to

be completed. More discipline. Less insecurity. Healthier. Calmer. More sociable. More productive. Better at handling criticism. Better at letting go. Less worrying. We can follow ourselves around for years with an imaginary clipboard. Well done. Not good enough. Relapse. Progress. Point to work on. We can learn. Grow. Practice. Take responsibility for what we do. But perhaps there is a point beyond which development turns into permanent disapproval of the person we are today. As though the present version were merely provisional. As though you were only truly allowed to begin living once you had finally become who you were supposed to be.

You can sit beside yourself as you would beside someone else. This is the person I woke up with today, with this fear, humor, mistakes and things I still want to work on.

Contact between unfinished people remains messy. We miss signals and give advice when someone wanted to be heard. And sometimes, in the middle of all that, someone looks up from their phone, pulls back a chair and says: tell me again. The problem still exists afterward. Help may still be needed tomorrow. But for a few minutes, the person opposite you is more than the person with the problem. Who are you today?


When
the Darkness
Comes
Even in the darkness
there is still space
to breathe.

When the Darkness Comes

There are days when life feels small. Not necessarily because something big is happening. Sometimes you wake up and everything feels heavier than yesterday. The light through the curtains. The sounds outside. The thought of what needs to be done today. You get up. Make coffee. Look at the table. And somewhere there is that feeling: Today, I just do not know how. Other times, there is a clear reason. A loss. An illness. A relationship breaking up. News you never wanted to be waiting for. Something someone has done to you. Or a period that lasts so long that you barely remember what it felt like before it began. Then words like hope, gratitude, and beauty can sound almost inappropriate. Like pointing to the sky at someone standing in the middle of a downpour and saying that the sun must be shining behind it. That may well be true. But it does not make anyone any less wet.

We like to make darkness lighter. That is understandable. When someone we love suffers, we look for something that can stand opposite that suffering. Look at what you still have. Try to see the beautiful things too. You must not lose heart. Sometimes such words can help. But sometimes they ask something of someone that that person is completely unable to give at that moment. As if pain only becomes acceptable when accompanied by a wise thought. As if grief must prove that it leads to something. That is not necessary. Darkness may first remain dark. A terrible event does not need to immediately acquire meaning. A person does not need to explain what they have learned from a loss while they are still in the middle of it. Someone who has been wronged does not need to emerge from that injustice softer,

wiser, or more forgiving. Some things do not deserve a nice conclusion. Perhaps only acknowledgment.

This is terrible. Period. And sometimes that is the most respectful sentence we can say.

Yet something peculiar happens to our attention when life turns dark. The world can narrow. That is not a mistake. When you are in pain, pain draws attention. Someone who burns their hand does not think of their feet. Someone who is afraid of a test result can hardly become interested in what is on television tonight. Someone who has lost someone sometimes sees the absence of that person everywhere. The empty chair. The coat that no longer hangs on the coat rack. The silence at a time when a key used to go in the door. Grief can fill the room. And perhaps sometimes it should be allowed to do so for a moment.

But a room can contain more than one thing. That is different from saying that you should look at the positive. Maybe you do not have to look for anything at all. Sometimes you notice it naturally. You are sad. And the coffee tastes good. You are afraid. And someone makes a joke that makes you laugh unexpectedly. You miss someone terribly. And outside, a bird sits on the fence as if nothing has happened. That can feel almost insulting. How can the world just go on? Cars drive. People go grocery shopping. Someone complains about the weather. A child wants an ice cream. The sun sets. While your world is no longer the same. And yet, there might be something wonderful in that too. Not because the world should be indifferent. But because reality is apparently big enough to contain multiple things at once. Grief. And coffee. Fear. And a bird. Loss. And a laugh you didn't ask for. Not: It is terrible, but there are also beautiful things. That word but can make everything

before it smaller. Perhaps rather: It is terrible. And that tree is beautiful. Both may be true.

Perhaps we are used to treating feelings as if they must replace each other. Either you are sad, or you are happy. Either you are afraid, or you feel safe. Either you mourn, or you move on. But a human being is apparently more complicated. You can miss someone and have a nice day. You can be relieved that someone has died because the suffering is over and yet intensely want that same person back. You can love someone you are incredibly angry with. You can be grateful and yet unhappy. You can be afraid of what is to come and curious about tomorrow. Perhaps we do not always have to choose one feeling from that to become the official feeling. Many things can exist within a person at the same time. That does not make us inauthentic. It makes us human.

I am sad is ordinary language. For me, the words there is sadness in me can sometimes place a different emphasis. They remind me that I am also the one who breathes, listens and occasionally laughs at something. That is a way of looking at my experience, not a technique for making sadness smaller. If these words do not fit, nothing in your language needs to change.

That difference can become important when a period lasts a long time. A bad afternoon is one thing. A difficult year is something else. When something remains present for months or years, it can slowly creep into your identity. I am the one who is sick. The one who was abandoned. The one for whom things went wrong. The one with that history. The one who cannot do what others can. Sometimes others even use that language for us. “That is that man who…” “She has…” “He can’t…”

A whole person is reduced to a single event, diagnosis, disability, or loss. But no one is a single chapter. Not even when that chapter has many pages. You might be the one who has experienced something terrible. And the one who laughs way too hard at a bad joke. The one who is afraid. And the one who knows how to patch a bicycle tire. The one who misses someone. And the one who always makes too much coffee. The one who barely got out of bed today. And the one who once walked through a strange city for hours without knowing where they were going. A person contains strange combinations.

Perhaps that protects us sometimes. Not because the darkness disappears. But because the darkness does not get the sole right to determine who we are.

That might sound hopeful. And that is precisely where we must be careful. For there is a harsh version of hope. A version that says you can always find something beautiful if you just look closely enough. That there is a gift in every loss. That difficult things make you stronger. That everything happens for a reason. Perhaps some people believe that. And perhaps that gives them true comfort. Then no one needs to take that comfort away from them. But we do not need to make a rule of it. A child who dies does not need to become a lesson. Violence does not have to make anyone stronger. Illness does not have to become an invitation to personal growth. Sometimes something is simply a loss. And if something grows later on, that does not make the loss necessary. A person can build a beautiful house after a fire. That does not mean the old house had to burn down. That distinction deserves space.

Nor is there a moral obligation to remain inwardly beautiful when the world has been ugly to you. People can become

embittered. Distrustful. Angry. Closed off. Sometimes that is not strange. Sometimes someone has learned that trust is dangerous. Perhaps anger was exactly what was needed for years to stay afloat. From the outside, we do not always know what function something has served. That is why we must be careful with words like letting go. Sometimes someone is not ready to let go at all. Perhaps that person needs to say for the first time: This was not right. Perhaps a report needs to be filed. A boundary needs to be set. A door locked. A treatment started. A relationship ended. Surrender must never become a friendly word with which we teach people to endure what does not need to be endured. Sometimes resistance is healthy. Sometimes anger is information. Sometimes leaving is the most loving move someone can make for themselves.

But what happens afterward? When you are gone. When the treatment is ongoing. When the funeral is over. When the practical matters have been taken care of. When everyone who asked how you were doing has moved on with their own lives. Then a quieter phase can begin. You are still there. With what happened. Perhaps one day a different question will arise. Not: How do I undo this? That is impossible. Not even: How do I get over this? Perhaps you do not need to get over anything. But: What do I not want to lose while I live with this? That answer does not have to be lofty. Perhaps you do not want to lose your sense of humor. Your curiosity. Your ability to trust someone. Your love of music. Your gentleness. Even your anger, as long as it helps you remember that what happened was not normal. Perhaps you simply do not want to lose yourself completely to what happened to you. Not because you are obliged to succeed at it. Simply because you still exist, too.

Sometimes the world helps with that without knowing it. A forest cannot solve anything. The sea offers no answer. A dog does not know which words you need. A sunset has no message. That is precisely what makes it comforting. A tree does not ask if things are getting better. The sea does not tell you to let go. A dog does not think that you should be moving on after six months. They are simply there. Perhaps that is why people sometimes seek out nature precisely during difficult times. Not because nature heals. Not because everyone has to love walking. But because there are places where our stories do not have to be the center of attention for a while. The wind blows even when we are sad. And very occasionally, that can bring peace. The world carries itself for a while. We only have to exist alongside it.

Other people can become such a place too. Not because they understand exactly what you are going through. Perhaps they do not at all. But they remain. They bring soup. They send a message after three months. They remember a difficult date. They ask for the name of the person who passed away instead of just asking about “your loss.” They dare to let someone who is no longer there re-exist in the conversation. Or they say nothing at all. They walk along. Sit beside you. Watch a bad movie together. Do the shopping. That is one of the strangest forms of hope. Not the conviction that everything will be alright. But the experience: There is still someone here. Sometimes that is enough for an evening.

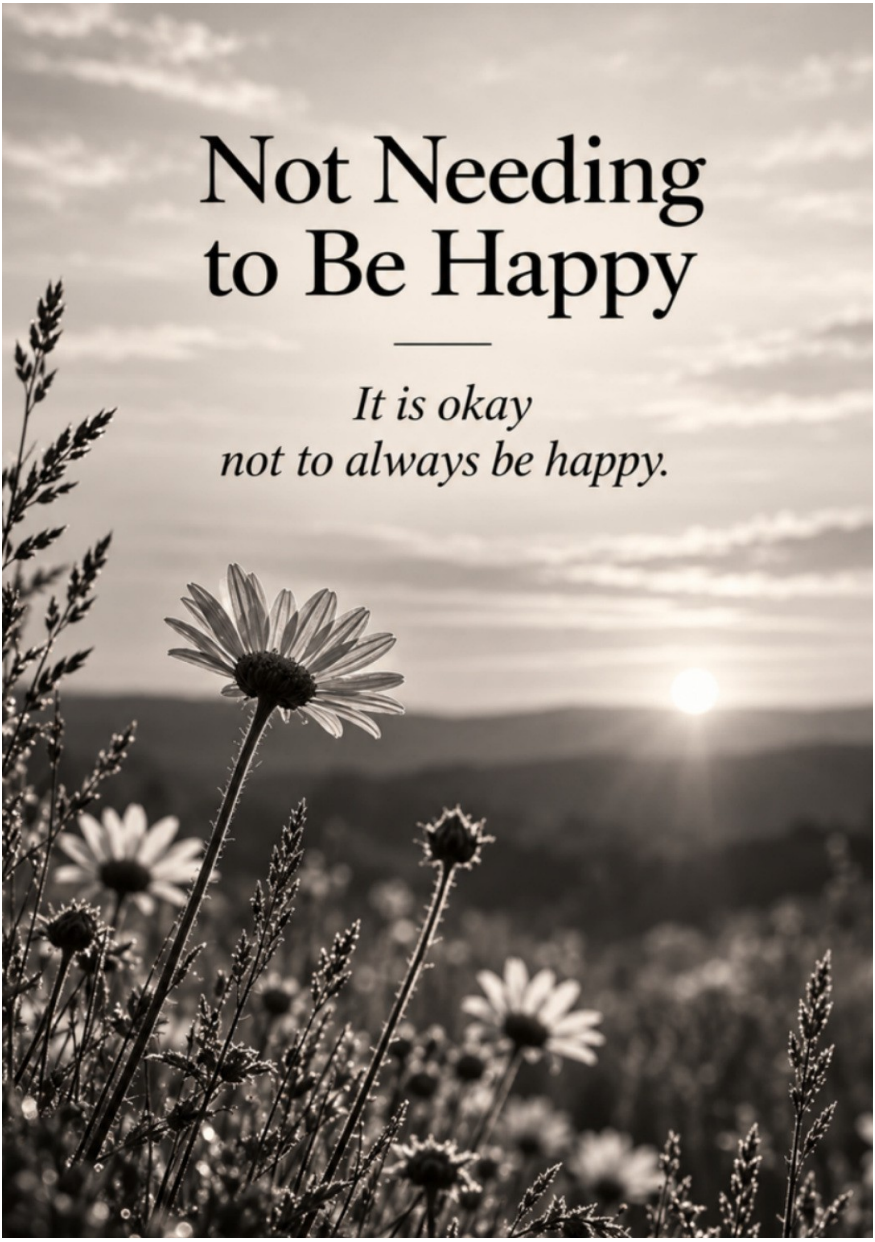
Perhaps the darkest thing about dark periods is not just the pain. It is also the feeling that it will always remain this way. When you are in the midst of something, time becomes difficult to imagine. Tomorrow looks like today. Next month looks like tomorrow. Your mind draws a line: This is how it

is from now on. Perhaps that is sometimes partially true. Some things remain. A loss remains a loss. A body may never be the same again. A history is not unwritten.

Remaining does not have to mean remaining the same. Grief can change without disappearing; a memory may become less sharp and unexpectedly hurt again. A smell, a song or a date can bring something back. Such a moment does not tell the whole story of the time in between.

Imagine a house during a storm. The rain beats against the windows. The wind tugs at the roof. Maybe there is a leak somewhere. You cannot pretend that it is quiet outside. You do not have to like the noise. You do not have to be grateful for the storm. Perhaps you even have to take action. Close a window. Put down a bucket. Call for help. Take shelter. But somewhere in that house, there might also be a lamp. Not to ward off the storm. Not as proof that everything is fine. Just a lamp. A small place where you can see what lies before you.

That is what hope may sometimes be. Not a prediction. Not a promise. No voice saying: The sun will shine tomorrow. Perhaps just: Here is a little light for tonight. And perhaps sometimes there is not even that. We must also dare to let that exist. Some nights are simply dark. No insight. No gratitude. No unexpected beauty. No one calling exactly on time. Then we do not have to turn the night into morning before it is over. Sometimes the sentence may become smaller. Not: It will be alright. Not: I can handle this. Perhaps just: I am still here. And if even that sentence is too big: This moment. This breath. This chair. This room. Perhaps there does not need to be anything more right now.


Not Needing
to Be Happy
It is okay
not to always be happy.

Not Needing to Be Happy

“How are you?” “Fine.” It is perhaps one of the most common answers we give. Fine. Just fine. Busy. Going along. And you? Often, it is simply true. There doesn’t have to be anything behind it. But sometimes we say “fine” on days when we don’t really know how we are doing at all. Not terrible. Not great. Just a bit empty. Tired. Restless. Gloomy, perhaps. A day when nothing is really wrong and yet nothing feels particularly light. Strangely enough, it is precisely such days that can be difficult. Because if something terrible has happened, we understand why we are sad. But what if there is actually nothing wrong? You have a home. People around you. Maybe work. Food. A warm bed. And yet, on Sunday afternoon, you sit on the couch and think: Is this all there is? Almost immediately, a second thought can follow: What am I complaining about?

We long for a life in which we feel at home. Pleasure, love, safety and calm can be part of that. But the longing can become a demand: I ought to be happy. Then a bad day feels like failure and the investigation begins. Am I doing something wrong? Is my work still right for me? Should I exercise more, spend less time on my phone or reorganize my life? Sometimes these are valuable questions.

Anyone who searches for relief long enough discovers how much is on offer. Books, apps, training courses, therapies, retreats, and methods to let go, become calmer, or finally find yourself. Some can truly mean something. There is nothing wrong with that. But grand promises deserve caution, especially when people are vulnerable and have to pay a lot of money for them. If a method is presented almost as a path to freedom, the absence of that freedom can

unknowingly become a new judgment: apparently, I am doing it wrong. Perhaps simpler language is allowed: this helped someone; it does not have to help you; and if it does not work, you haven't failed.

A feeling of dissatisfaction can tell us that something is truly wrong. Perhaps we are stuck in work that exhausts us. Perhaps we are lonely. Perhaps we are living in a relationship in which we are slowly disappearing. Perhaps we need help. But sometimes there is no big answer. Sometimes it is just a gray morning. That sounds almost too simple. But perhaps we have lost something when every bad day has to be explained.

A human life simply contains quite a lot of ordinary days. Not the day you get married. Not the birth of a child. Not that trip you have been looking forward to for years. Not the day you finally receive good news. Just a workday. The alarm goes off. You look for clean pants. There is still a plate from yesterday on the counter. You have to work. There is a traffic jam. Someone asks you to pick up some milk. You cook. You tidy up. You watch something. You go to bed. And somewhere between all those things, a life takes place. That is a curious thought. We often wait for the special moments and discover later that the greater part of our existence consists of the moments in between. The coffee before work. A child who takes far too long to put on their shoes. A dog that needs to go outside while it is raining. The dishwasher. The supermarket. A conversation at the table that no one remembers what it was about later. Sometimes, therefore, a good life is something other than a collection of happy highlights. Perhaps a good life is, to a large extent, a life that is habitable even on ordinary afternoons.

And perhaps meaning does not have to wait until we feel good. A person can experience sadness, unrest, or

limitations themselves and still mean something to someone else. Holding a conversation. Caring for someone. Making something. Working when possible. Remembering a name. Showing up somewhere. Not as a remedy for gloom and not as proof that everyone should be able to do more. Sometimes the space for that is small. But participating in life is something different from being constantly happy.

Moreover, perhaps happiness itself is less stable than we would like. Think of something you once longed for immensely. A car. A job. A house. A relationship. A certain amount in your bank account. You can work hard for years and build a life that you think provides security. And perhaps it works out. You enjoy what you have built up. Until life shows how quickly a relationship, a house, a job, or significant possessions can change or even disappear. After that, things may still be beautiful or pretty, but sometimes you attach to them differently. Not because possessions are worthless, but because you have experienced that they could never provide the guarantee you might have sought in them. There was a period when I lived in a camper. The freedom I longed for was truly there. Yet in the evenings, when the camper was parked for the night, I discovered something simple: my inner restlessness had traveled with me.

What was once new and special can become familiar. The new car became the car; the new house became home. Yesterday's dream can become the background against which we already miss something else. That is why, for me, the waiting for happiness itself deserves attention: after this step, after that change, when I finally... There can always be another when.

Perhaps we don’t need to push happiness aside. There is nothing wrong with longing for a life that feels good. On the

contrary. Pleasure is wonderful. Falling in love. Laughing until your stomach hurts. Swimming on a warm day. Loud music in the car. A table full of people. An unexpected message from someone you care about. A child snuggling up against you. The rain against the windows while you sit warm inside. We don’t need to diminish happiness to make room for unhappiness. Perhaps both can actually exist.

The problem begins when happiness becomes the price of admission to a successful life. If I am not happy, I am doing something wrong. Then every difficult feeling becomes an assessment: sadness, doubt, boredom and fear all receive a failing grade. Yet they are not outside life. Even a bad week need not mean that something is fundamentally wrong.

Still, there is a difference between a gray day and sorrow that makes eating, sleeping or looking after yourself barely possible. Fear can make your life so small that you cannot find a way out alone. Then help may be needed: a conversation, treatment or medication. That is not failed acceptance, but care for what is actually happening.

A diagnosis can then help make sense of symptoms and find suitable care. The name does not tell everything: lives and needs differ even within the same diagnosis. Alongside knowledge and research, the question of how this particular person is doing remains important.

Music, meditation, a conversation or a story may be valuable to someone. Something that gives meaning is not thereby an effective treatment. This book cannot assess that distinction for your situation.

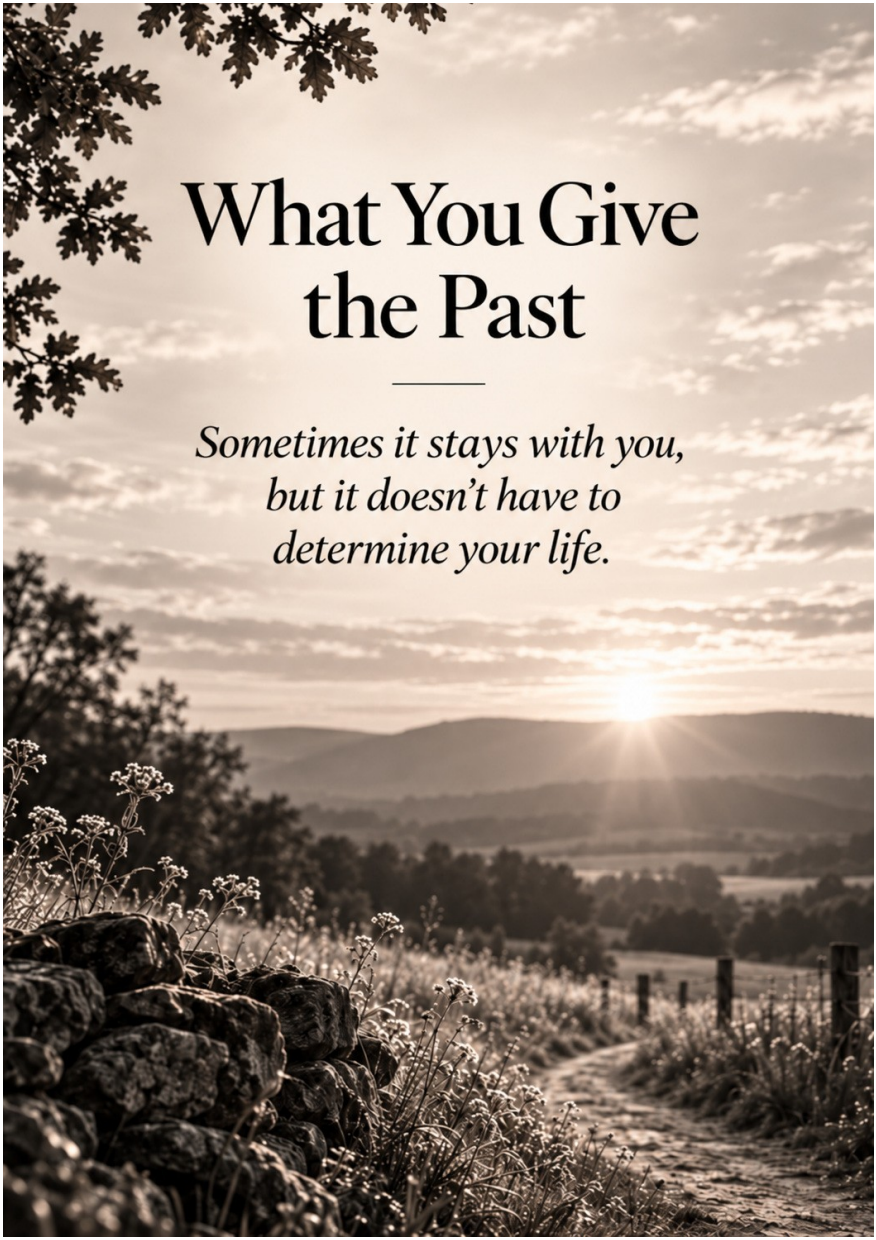
Today I am not happy. That sentence need not immediately be followed by a plan to change it. You can consider what this day asks for without already turning it into a judgment on your entire life.

Am I happy? is a large question, as though you have to grade your whole existence in a single moment. Smaller questions may fit better. Was there anything pleasant today? Someone with whom I could be myself? Something that matters to me? No is also an answer. When little feels bearable or worthwhile any more, that is reason to talk to someone about it. You do not have to work it out alone.

A life can contain sorrow and still have moments of vitality. You can grieve and love someone, feel uncertain and try something. It need not be turned into a happy ending. It is about what is truly present today, alongside what is difficult.

And perhaps that also changes how we sit beside others. We no longer need to be so afraid of their unhappiness. Someone says: “I feel awful.” And perhaps our first answer does not have to be: “What are you going to do about it?” Maybe we can ask: “Do you want to tell me what feels awful?” Or: “Shall I stay for a moment?” Sometimes a solution emerges naturally afterward. Sometimes not. Maybe you are drinking coffee. Maybe you are talking about something completely different. Sometimes there is laughter while grief is still sitting at the table. That is not a betrayal of grief. People are allowed to laugh during difficult times. They are allowed to eat cake after a funeral. They are allowed to have a good day while someone they love is seriously ill. They are allowed to enjoy themselves without asking their problems for permission.

“Fine.” Or: “Busy.” But perhaps there is someone to whom you can say: “Actually, not so good today.” And they do not immediately offer a solution. Perhaps a chair simply slides back. “Come and sit down.” Perhaps a good life is not one in which we are always happy, but one in which our unhappy days can also have a place.


What You Give the Past
Sometimes it stays with you, but it doesn't have to determine your life.

What You Give the Past

The past is over. That is a fact. And sometimes it is not true at all. Not on a Monday morning when you wake with a memory older than the room in which you are lying. Not when someone says something and your body has already reacted before you understand why. Not when you hear yourself respond in a way that sounds suspiciously like someone from long ago. Not when a smell takes you back to a house you have not visited in twenty years. The calendar may have moved on. A part of us does not always travel at the same pace. That is why the words you have to leave it behind are of so little help. If it truly lay behind you, no one would need to tell you to put it there.

We all carry history. A childhood. People who loved us. People who did not know how to do that well. Things that were said. Things that were never said at all. Choices of which we are proud. Choices we hope no one will ever mention again. Some memories feel warm. Others we would rather tear from our story. But a human life does not work like a notebook. You cannot remove a page without leaving a trace somewhere. Nor do you have to. Perhaps the question is not how we can live without a past. We cannot. The question may be: How much of today does yesterday still receive?

Sometimes, quite a lot. Perhaps someone damaged your trust and, years later, new people first have to prove that they will not do the same. After betrayal or a breakup, love can take on a strange double quality. You can love someone new while remaining alert for signs that things will go wrong again. Perhaps part of you would rather not become

attached at all: those who do not love can lose less. Yet that wall does not protect you only from pain. Sometimes it also keeps out exactly what you long for. Trust, then, is not forgetting what happened.

Perhaps it is slowly discovering that a new person does not continually have to answer for an old story.

Perhaps you were often criticized in the past and now hear that criticism in your own voice. You make a mistake. Before anyone else says a word, you are already there: There you go. Can you never do anything right? What is wrong with you… Perhaps you recognize the words. Perhaps you do not. Sometimes people continue to live within us after we no longer recognize their voice as theirs. We think this is how we think about ourselves, while someone else once began the first sentences.

A reaction can feel surprisingly familiar. Someone withdraws, criticizes or raises their voice, and you recognize something old. Earlier experiences may play a part, but the reaction alone cannot tell us where it comes from. Not every irritation is a wound and not every argument is a trauma. Sometimes someone is simply irritating. You can be curious about a connection without already treating it as the explanation.

You can wonder what played a part in someone else's life. A parent knew little warmth themselves; someone lived with fear or carried a difficult history. Such possibilities deserve caution: not everything that seems plausible in retrospect is an established cause.

Whatever you understand about the background, the consequences do not disappear. You can say: I understand a

little more about you. And at the same time: what you did hurt me and should not have happened.

This is often where the word forgiveness appears. It sounds beautiful. Almost as if it were the final destination. First pain. Then working through it. Then forgiveness. And after that, freedom. Perhaps that is genuinely how it happens for some people. One day someone may notice that the anger has diminished. That understanding has arisen. That they no longer long for an apology. That forgiveness releases something which had been stuck for years. That can be precious. But forgiveness is difficult to command. “You have to do it for yourself.” That is still a command. Perhaps someone does not want to forgive at all. Sometimes they cannot. Perhaps they do not even know what the word would mean in this situation. Must forgiveness mean that you are no longer angry? That you resume contact? That you understand what the other person did? That you no longer have a right to grieve? That you say it is over?

Perhaps it need mean none of these things. You can forgive someone and never sit at the same table with them again. You can no longer feel resentment and still keep the door closed. You can understand without forgiving. You can forgive and still be sad. And perhaps you can build a good life without ever using the word forgiveness.

Sometimes distance is not bitterness. It is a boundary. That distinction can matter. Not every relationship needs to be restored. Not every family conflict calls for reunion. Not every wound heals better when the person who caused it comes close again. There are situations in which staying away is self-care. In which blocking a telephone number is not revenge. In which no longer explaining yourself finally

brings peace. In which you accept that the other person may never understand your version.

Distance can also bring grief. Sometimes we hold on to the conversation we hope will happen one day: the acknowledgement, the apology, that one sentence: You were right. I hurt you. Perhaps that conversation will happen. People can look back and take responsibility. Sometimes, though, it never comes. Then a difficult question remains: how do I go on living if the acknowledgement I hope for does not arrive? What happened does not become less important because of that.

An answer does not have to come immediately. The question alone may open something. Some people look at their past and think mainly about what others did to them. Others are haunted instead by what they themselves have done. That is at least as complicated. There are mistakes for which you can apologize. Damage you can repair. Money you can repay. A conversation that can still be held. Taking responsibility is not the same as condemning yourself. Sometimes the past really does ask something of us. Not only acceptance, but action. Acknowledgment. Apology. Repairing what can still be repaired. And then there are things that can no longer be put right. The other person is no longer there. Contact has been lost. The damage is permanent. Or you have done everything still possible and notice that guilt keeps returning. What then?

Perhaps we sometimes think that continuing to punish ourselves is a form of responsibility, as if we demonstrate that we truly understand how wrong something was by never allowing ourselves to be fully free again. But whom does that ultimately help? Guilt can teach us something. It can say: I never want to do this again. It can return us to our

values. It can lead to repair. But when guilt says only: Therefore you no longer deserve a good life, perhaps it has become something else: a prison without an end date.

Perhaps understanding is not the same as condoning when it comes to ourselves either. You can look back and say: I understand why I acted that way then. And at the same time: I wish I had acted differently. You do not have to choose between the two. Perhaps you knew less then. Perhaps you were afraid. Addicted. Angry. Young. Desperate. Perhaps you were in pain yourself. That explains something. It does not automatically change what happened. But perhaps the person you are now may look with a little more tenderness at the person you were then. Not from a position of superiority. More from the realization: You did not yet know what I know now. That may be one of the strange things about growing older. We judge earlier versions of ourselves with knowledge they did not yet possess.

We cannot rewrite the past. But perhaps we are continually rewriting what the past means today. A memory that once evoked only shame may later also evoke compassion. Someone who existed in your mind for years only as a perpetrator may one day become more complicated, without their actions becoming any less wrong. A period that felt like wasted time may later prove to be part of how you understand other people. Not because everything happened for a reason. It need not have. But because meaning is not necessarily fixed on the day something happens. Some events acquire different meanings as we change. Perhaps a life story is therefore never completely finished for as long as the person telling it is still alive. The facts remain the same. Our relationship to them can move. Imagine living in

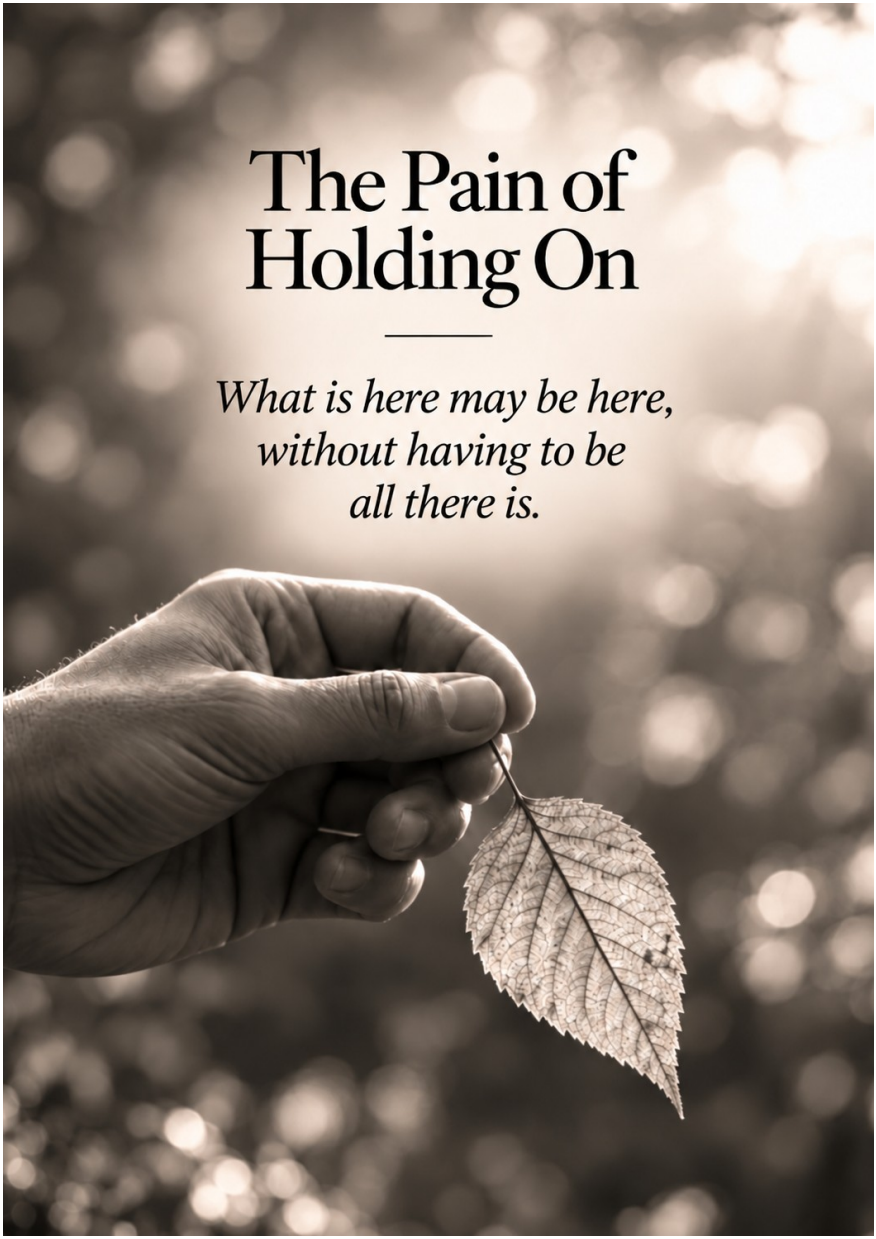
an old house. There are cracks in some walls. A door sticks. In places you can see where something once hung. You can spend years trying to return the house to the day it was built. But that house no longer exists.

You can also decide that every mark must remain visible, because anything else would be dishonest. Sometimes that is not necessary either. You can repair what can be repaired. Repaint a wall. Replace a window. Leave something as it is. Use a room differently. Hang new photographs. Not to deny who once lived there, but because you live there now. Perhaps that is what we do with our history. We inhabit a life in which life has already been lived.

And sometimes the past simply comes to visit. Without an appointment. You thought it was finished. Then you hear a song. See a name. A date comes around. Someone makes a remark. And there it is again. That need not mean you have failed to work through it. Perhaps “working through it” is a strange expression anyway, as if there comes a moment when an event is neatly put away and the file can be closed. Some things remain tender. Not every old pain is an open wound. Sometimes it is a scar. You may go years without thinking about it, and then someone touches that exact place.

Returning pain does not undo all the days in between. You can consider what this situation asks for now, even when an earlier experience plays a part. Sometimes it helps to explore that with someone. Sometimes you need to grieve, visit a grave or see a therapist. And sometimes there are other things to do. You do not have to feel your history constantly to take it seriously.

What happened remains part of your story. But a story does not consist only of the pages already written. There is paper left as well. How much, we do not know. Perhaps a great deal. Perhaps very little. No one is given certainty about that in advance. But today, at least, there is still a small piece. And perhaps we do not need to make anything impressive of it. No triumph. No inspiring conclusion. Perhaps only a day on which the person who once hurt you does not receive every hour. A day on which an old mistake does not take away every good moment. A day on which you notice that your past is present without your living in the middle of it. It may have a room in your house. Perhaps even a large one. But it does not have to sit at the head of the table every evening.


The Pain of Holding On
What is here may be here, without having to be all there is.

The Pain of Holding On

Letting go often sounds beautiful. Almost light. You picture a hand opening. Something being released. A leaf carried away by the wind. Water flowing on. But in a human life, letting go does not always feel that way. Sometimes it feels more like losing. For what do you have to let go of when you miss someone? The love? The memories? The voice you can still hear clearly? The habit of telling something in your mind to someone who is no longer there? And what does letting go mean when you do not lose a person, but a life you thought you would have? A healthy body. A future together. A family. Work you have always done. A place where you lived. A version of yourself that will not return. Perhaps that is why it is not strange that we hold on. We hold on to some things simply because we love them.

Something is constantly changing. Usually, we notice little of it. You do not wake up one morning and think: Today I have grown older. A child does not suddenly grow up. A face does not change overnight. A friendship rarely becomes an old friendship on Tuesday at a quarter past three. It happens slowly. A little here. A little there. Until you see a photograph from ten years ago. Or find clothes that haven't fit for ages. You look at someone who once wanted to be lifted up and who now walks out the door by themselves. And suddenly you see what time has done all that time. That is one of the strange characteristics of change. While it is happening, it is almost invisible. Only when we look back do we see how much has disappeared.

Not everything that disappears is sad. Fortunately not. A difficult period can end. Pain can subside. A child can

become more independent. You can leave a home where you were never happy. Some doors close and you are relieved. But even desired change can have a dual nature. You can be happy that your child is finding their own way and miss the time when they needed you foreverything. You can finally move and still cry when you walk through an empty room for the last time. You can recover and at the same time realize that the period when everyone was so close is over. You can long for freedom and, as soon as you have it, miss something of what you left behind. Sometimes people are not made for one feeling at a time. We encountered that earlier. Joy and sorrow can sit at the same table. Perhaps precisely because much change is not just about what is to come. Something disappears too. We know, of course, that nothing lasts forever. That is not a new thought. Flowers wilt. Seasons change.

Bodies grow older. People die. Everyone knows that. And yet, for a large part of our lives, we live as if things will simply remain as they are for the time being. Fortunately so. It would be unbearable if, during every fine moment, we constantly thought: This shall pass. You would look at your child and already feel sad about the day they leave home. During a dinner party, you would think about the last time everyone will ever sit at the table together. You would hug someone and wonder how many hugs are left. We cannot live like that. Perhaps the ordinary protects us from this. Back to work tomorrow. See you later. See you next week. See you Sunday. We speak as if the future is a matter of course. Most of the time, perhaps we have to do so. Until something reminds us that this matter of course was a temporary arrangement. A diagnosis. An accident. A farewell. Or Just time. Then the urge can arise to want to go back. Not just to someone. To how it used to be.

We want the table back. The voice in the hallway. The body that could still do what it can no longer do. The children small. Our parents young. Ourselves unaware of what would happen later. Perhaps that is why homesickness is sometimes much greater than longing for a place. You can be homesick for a time when you did not yet know what you know now.

Holding on is an attempt to keep something with us. That does not have to be wrong. We keep photos. Letters. A piece of clothing. A voicemail. A recipe in a handwriting we recognize. A chair. A scent. A song. People are curious collectors of presence. An object that means hardly anything to anyone else can become almost a door to us. You hold it, and for a moment someone feels close. Why should we have to let that go? Perhaps we do not have to at all. There is no rule that says moving on means you have to clear everything away. Some things are allowed to stay. The pain may not always lie in the act of holding on itself. Perhaps it sometimes lies in our demand that what we hold onto must become the way it was again. A memory can remain. A moment cannot. Love can remain. A body cannot. Meaning can remain. A situation cannot. And that is precisely where friction can occur. We try to return to what has vanished with what still exists. One more time.

One more conversation. One more day. If only I had known it was the last one. Almost everyone who has lost something precious knows that thought. We would have looked more closely. Stayed longer. Been in less of a hurry. Asked something else. Said something else. But the painful thing about a last time is that it often only gets its name in hindsight. At the moment itself, it was just Thursday.

That is why loss is so difficult to comprehend. It is not just something that is gone. The world itself changes shape a little. When someone important to you disappears, small versions of yourself disappear too. The person you were with that person. The jokes that only existed there. The way your name sounded when that person said it. The stories for which you didn't have to give an explanation. Another person carries pieces of us that do not exist exactly the same way anywhere else. So when that person is gone, we do not just miss him or her. Sometimes we also miss who we were together. No one can replace that. A new love is not a replacement for an old one. A new friend does not take the place of the one who died. A new house does not become the previous house. Perhaps something new does not have to justify our missing what came before. They can exist side by side.

Moving on sounds like a direction: forward, without looking back. In a life, those movements often overlap. You begin something new and think of the past. You laugh at a birthday party and miss the person who should have been there. A new bond does not simply erase an old one.

Love can remain when you can no longer express it in the old way. You want to call, tell something or reach out, and the movement meets absence. For some people, connection takes a different form: a ritual, a story, saying someone's name. For someone else, the person is simply still often in their thoughts. No special form needs to be found for that bond to count.

But holding on can also hurt when we cling to something that no longer exists. Not only in the case of death. Perhaps you keep waiting for years for a relationship that is actually over. Not necessarily for the person. For the idea. For how

it should have been. Perhaps you keep measuring yourself against a body from twenty years ago. Against a career that is no longer possible. Against a dream that once seemed logical but no longer fits your life. Then it is sometimes difficult to see exactly what hurts. The loss itself? Or the daily comparison with a reality that will not return? I used to be able to do this. We used to be like this. I thought my life would look different now. These are understandable sentences. But when every day has to compete with an idealized yesterday, today stands little chance. That does not mean we have to be satisfied with everything that has changed. Perhaps you rightly want back what was lost.

Your health. A relationship. Your independence. And sometimes recovery is possible.

Then you are allowed to fight for it. Work on rehabilitation. Talk. Practice. Seek treatment. Try. Surrender does not mean giving up a possibility because acceptance might sound nicer. But perhaps there comes a moment when the question changes. Not: Can I still fix this? But: What if this really remains different? That is not a simple question. Perhaps you shouldn't even ask it for a long time. But when it presents itself, it can reveal something. How much of my life is waiting for the return of something that might not come back?

Letting go can also raise questions about who you are. Without this work, this relationship, the care you always gave. Even something painful may have become familiar. The known at least has a map; the unknown does not yet.

A different reality does not become ordinary immediately. The first birthday without someone. The first holiday after a separation. The first time someone else sits in that chair.

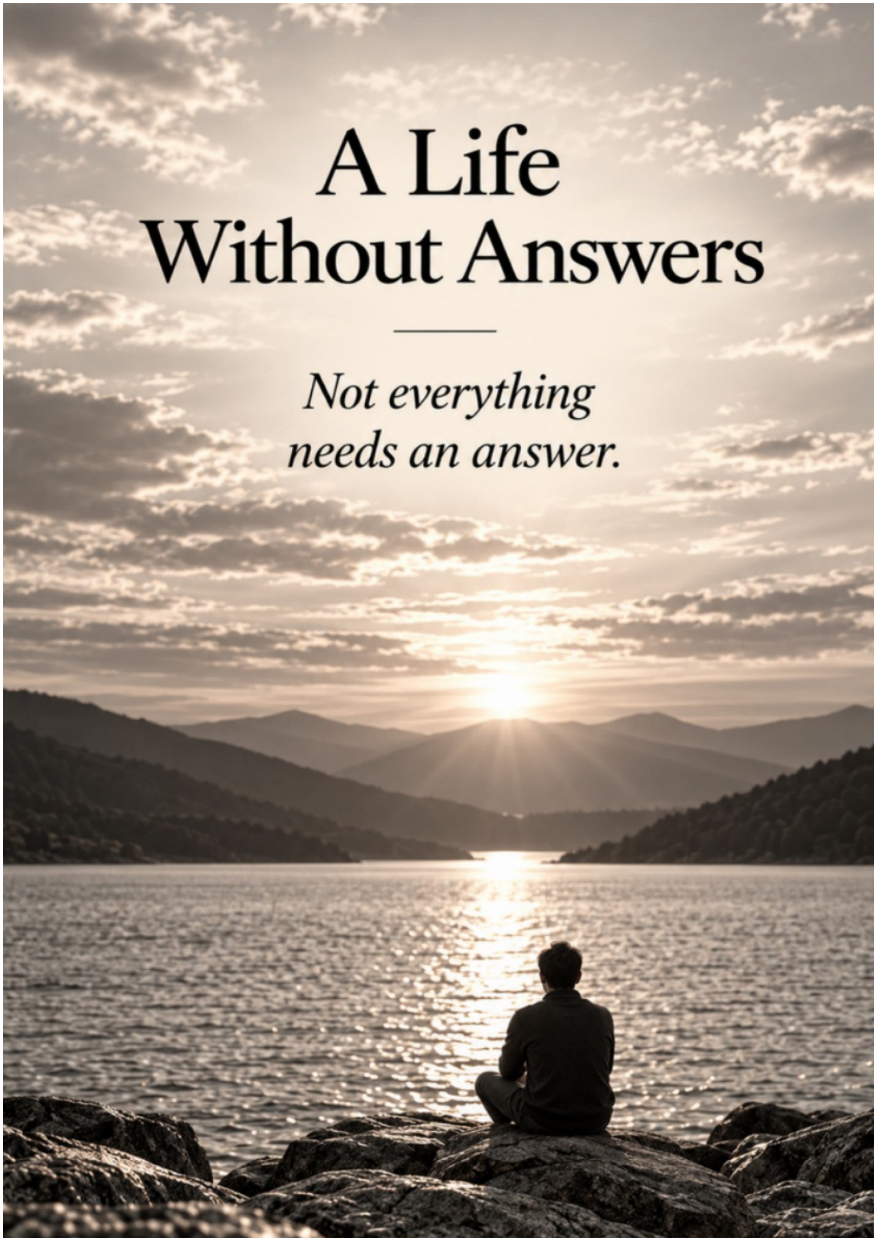
You know the actions and the date, but the world in which they take place has changed.

There is a difference between remembering and returning. Remembering says: This was there. Returning longs: Let it be like that again. Sometimes remembering is a way for love to remain without constantly having to deny reality. A photo doesn’t have to bring someone back to be meaningful. A story does not have to happen again. Perhaps one day you can smile at something you used to only cry about. That does not mean you have started loving less. Perhaps the memory has simply been given more room to carry different feelings.

Less grief can feel like disloyalty. If I give away his belongings, am I giving him away? What does a new love say about what we had? Questions like these can make an ordinary decision feel heavy. Yet the number of possessions we keep does not measure a love. You can clear something away and miss someone. You can keep something without feeling sorrow every day.

Enjoy it, because before you know it… Those words can create pressure too, as though you must later regret not having enjoyed today enough. Nobody gives every moment their full attention. We are tired, distracted or occupied with something else. Sometimes an ordinary afternoon becomes special only in retrospect.

Perhaps letting go sometimes means changing your grip rather than giving something away. A letter stays in the drawer, but you read it less often. A memory remains precious even when you no longer seek it out every day. What happened does not acquire a different ending. The letter is still there.


A Life
Without Answers
Not everything
needs an answer.

A Life Without Answers

Why? It may be one of the first questions we learn to ask. Why is the sky blue? Why do I have to go to bed? Why am I not allowed to do that? Why is it raining? As children, we can go on endlessly. Every answer is followed by another why. Later, the questions become more complicated. Why did she, of all people, become ill? Why did this relationship fall apart? Why could he not stay? Why did this happen in our family? Why did I make that choice? Why is this happening to me? Somewhere along the way, we discover something for which no one truly prepares us: some why questions receive no answer.

That does not mean we should not search. Sometimes there really is an explanation. A doctor can explain what is causing certain symptoms. An investigation can reveal what happened. Years later, a conversation may finally explain why someone left. You may look back on a period of your life and suddenly see patterns you could not see at the time. Understanding can be important. Sometimes even liberating. What felt chaotic acquires coherence. What seemed personal turns out to mean something else. You discover that you were not imagining it. That there was a reason you responded as you did. That something truly was not right. Answers can bring peace. That is precisely why we want them so badly.

But not every life can be fully explained. Even when we know how something happened, we do not always know why. The medical cause of an illness may be known. Yet that does not answer why this particular person became ill. You may understand why a relationship ended and still not

understand why something that once felt so good ultimately was not enough. You may know exactly what happened during an accident and still think every night: Why that day? Facts answer many questions. Not necessarily the question that hurts.

Perhaps that is why we sometimes look for a larger story. It was meant to be. It happened for a reason. Everything happens for a purpose. Such a thought may offer some people something to hold on to. There is nothing wrong with that. A person may find meaning wherever that meaning sustains them: in faith, chance, destiny, God, nature, or a larger whole they do not fully understand. But what comforts one person can sound almost painful to another. For if everything has a reason, what reason could justify the loss of a child? Violence? An illness that slowly breaks someone down? A person being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Perhaps we should be careful with answers that are too large for another person's grief, especially when they have not asked for them.

I do not know can sound like falling short. You want to say something useful when someone asks whether it will ever hurt less. You hope so. You do not know how it will unfold for this person. I hope so can then be more honest than a prediction. Or: I would like to stay with you a little longer. You do not need to know the future to be present today.

Knowing, understanding and accepting do not automatically coincide. You can know that someone has died and still be unable to take it in. You can understand a decision and still find it unacceptable. You can live on without knowing why something happened.

What you understand in retrospect can change. You learn more about yourself, others or the time in which something happened. Loving intentions and painful consequences can exist in the same history. That does not make the consequences smaller or remove responsibility. A broader view need not become reconciliation. Sometimes an experience remains contradictory even when all the available information is on the table.

Looking back, we often tell the story of our life as though it unfolded logically. This happened. Because of that, I chose this.

Then I met that person. I learned from it. And eventually it brought me here. Beautiful stories arise in this way. But in the middle of life, it rarely feels so orderly. There are loose ends. Wrong turns. Years whose meaning you do not know. Coincidences. Decisions you made mostly because they seemed the least bad idea at the time. Perhaps coherence sometimes emerges only afterward. And perhaps even that coherence is a story we create in order to understand what did not happen as a story. That does not make it less valuable. Human beings live in stories. But perhaps we can become a little kinder toward the chapters whose meaning we do not yet know.

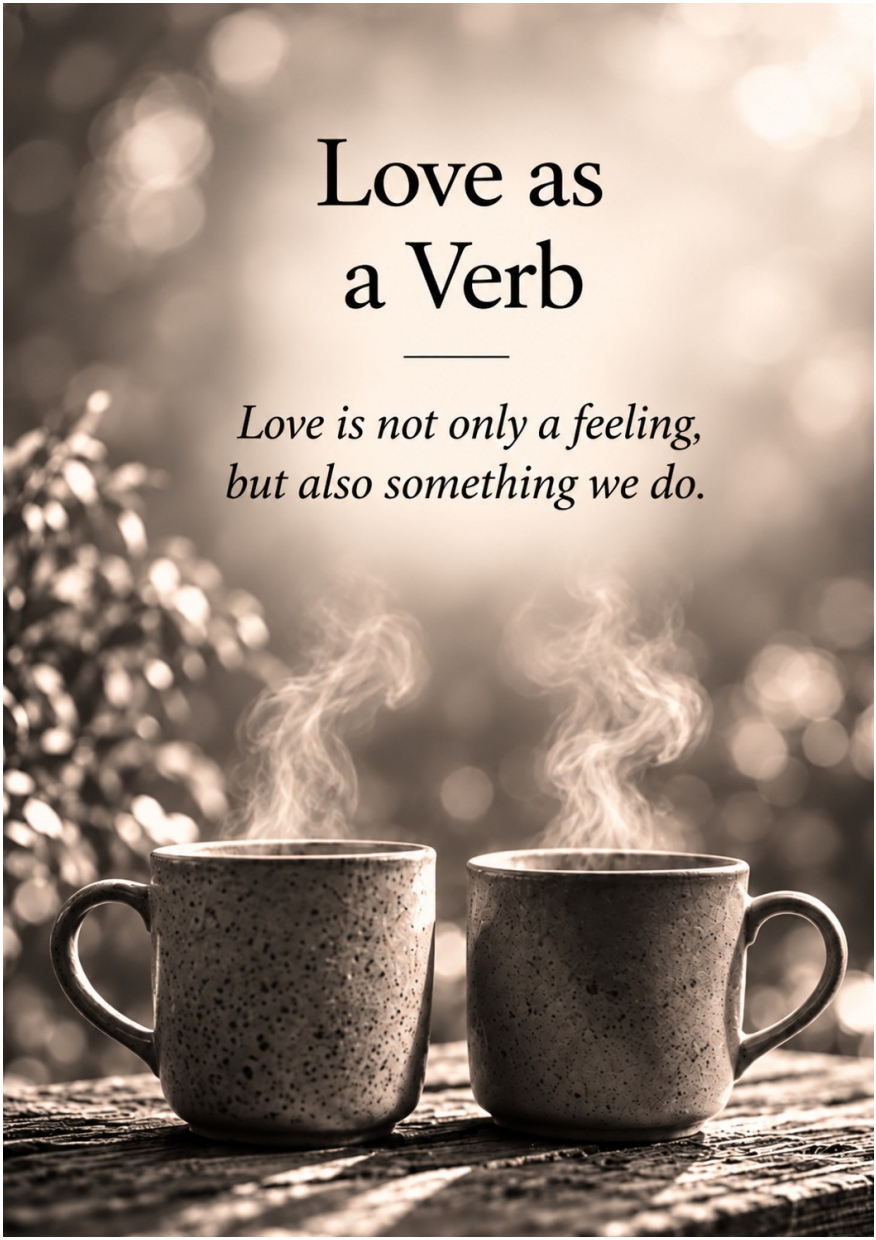
There are also questions about which people hold different beliefs. What happens when we die? Does our life have a purpose beyond what we give it ourselves? People believe, doubt, read and pray. Between belief and disbelief there can also be a place for I do not know. For me, that place need not be empty; there can be wonder.

An unanswered question can keep returning. You reread a message or replay a conversation. Sometimes new

information appears; sometimes you reach the same limit again. There is a difference between having something left to investigate and repeatedly searching for the same missing sentence. It is not always easy to tell which you are doing.

Some decisions leave us with nothing to compare them with. What if I had stayed? What if I had said yes? We live one version of our life. We can imagine the others, but cannot go back and try them. Sometimes that leaves us unsure whether a choice was the best one, even when we understand why we made it.

I do not know is not an answer that resolves the question. It describes the limit of what I know. Tomorrow may bring something more. Sometimes the same question remains unanswered.


Love as
a Verb
Love is not only a feeling,
but also something we do.

Love as a Verb

Someone makes coffee for you. Not once, but for years, and by now knows exactly how much milk it needs. Someone texts: Did you get home safely? Comes along to an appointment you dread. Listens again to a story they already know, puts a glass of water beside your bed or takes out the rubbish because you are tired. Remembers that something difficult awaits you tomorrow and asks afterward how it went. None of these would necessarily be the great love scene in a film. Yet a life can be full of them.

Love has a good reputation. We write songs, books and poems about it. In films, music plays when two people finally find each other. But what does love look like after the music stops? When the shopping needs doing, someone comes home tired or the same irritation appears for the hundredth time? When a child calls in the middle of the night, a parent needs more help or being in love no longer makes everything shine by itself? Then love turns out to be more than something we feel. It has to go somewhere.

Feelings come and go without much consultation. You can love someone deeply and, at a particular moment, prefer not to have them in the same room. You can miss someone and feel relieved to be alone for a while. Wake beside the person you love and mainly think that you would like ten more minutes of sleep. Perhaps we expect too much when love must feel warm, certain and intense all the time. You do not feel it every minute. Sometimes you only see it in what someone does.

Perhaps love lives more often in repetition than in spectacle. That applies not only to partners. A father standing on the

sidelines every Saturday. A daughter doing her mother's paperwork. A friend helping with a move. A neighbor bringing a pot of soup. Someone who, months later, still asks how you truly are. A brother who is not good at talking but gets straight into the car when you call. Love has many dialects. Not everyone speaks it in words. Some people hardly ever say, I love you, yet they are there every time. Others speak beautifully but disappear as soon as things become complicated. Perhaps, then, we should not only listen to what love says. We should also look at what it does. But here too, we must be careful. Caring for someone is not automatically the same as loving them. You can do so much for someone that you slowly disappear yourself. Always available. Always adapting. Always understanding. Always the one who absorbs the impact. From the outside, that may look like enormous love. From the inside, perhaps like exhaustion. Sometimes even fear.

If I say no, they will leave. If I do not help, I am selfish. If I state my boundary, I will disappoint someone. Perhaps love without boundaries can eventually become something in which no one is truly free. When we think of boundaries, we sometimes think of distance. A fence. A door. This far and no further. But a boundary can be an attempt to remain close. I want to listen to you, but not while you are shouting at me. I am glad to help, but I cannot come every day. I love you, and I cannot continue to accept this behavior. There is something painful in such sentences. We would sometimes prefer love to be able to carry everything. But perhaps love does not have to carry everything in order to be love. Sometimes saying no is more honest than a yes that slowly turns into resentment.

That is one of the most difficult things about loving: the other person does not belong to us. However close someone becomes. Your partner. Your child. Your best friend. There remains an area that is not yours. An inner world of their own. A history. Desires. Fears. Thoughts you do not know. Choices you cannot make. We can influence one another. Offer support. Warn. Sometimes restrain someone when there is immediate danger. But we cannot become another person and live on their behalf.

That can be painful when someone you love makes choices you do not understand. Perhaps you can see what is going wrong. You want to intervene. Explain. Rescue. You think: If only you would... But the other person has a life of their own. And their own pace. Perhaps love sometimes means enduring that you are not the one who writes another person's story. That does not mean we must watch powerlessly. If someone is in danger, action may be needed. If a child needs protection, protection is love. If someone is severely destabilized, bringing in help may be necessary.

If there is violence, intervention may be important. Love is no excuse for passivity. But in many ordinary situations, there is no emergency button. Someone you love is facing a choice. And you do not know what they should do. Perhaps they do not know either. Then love can become something very simple: I will think it through with you. Not: I will decide for you.

We cannot give each other a life without pain. You can support and protect someone where possible, but you cannot prevent every loss or disappointment. As soon as someone matters, their absence can hurt. After a loss, you may think: never that close again. No one needs to talk you

out of that quickly. Love and the wish to protect yourself can exist side by side.

Perhaps love is therefore not only warmth, but courage as well. Not the spectacular courage of heroic stories. The small courage of becoming attached to someone again while knowing that nothing is guaranteed. Of saying: You matter to me, while also saying: Therefore, you can touch and hurt me. That is a considerable risk. And yet people take it constantly. We have children. Form friendships. Fall in love. Take in a dog. Build a life with people whom we know - though thankfully we rarely think about it - we cannot keep forever. Perhaps that is not illogical. Perhaps that is life itself.

Love also appears when the feeling is difficult to reach. In long relationships, for example. There may be periods in which two people can barely find one another. Work. Children. Worries. Tiredness. Irritations that accumulate. Conversations consisting mainly of: “What time will you be home?” “Have you arranged that yet?” “What are we eating?” “Can you tomorrow…?” Perhaps that is not the love songs are written about. But sometimes it is right underneath. In the evening, someone silently places a blanket over the other. A bicycle tire is inflated. A lunchbox prepared. An appointment rescheduled. Not because someone is overcome by romance at that moment, but because: you are part of what I care for. Sometimes love is less a feeling that happens to us and more a direction in which we move.

That does not mean every relationship must continue. That, too, would be dangerous. People can love one another and be unable to live well together. You can love someone and still leave. Perhaps sometimes precisely because staying is

causing more and more damage. Love does not guarantee a good relationship. More is needed. Safety. Respect. Trust. Freedom. A willingness to listen to one another. Boundaries. And sometimes that does not work. Then a relationship may end while the love has not yet disappeared. Perhaps that is exactly what makes parting so difficult. We like to think that people leave when they no longer love. But sometimes they leave while they still do, because love alone proved not to be enough. Perhaps love becomes clearest when someone changes. A person never remains exactly the one with whom we once fell in love. Bodies change. Ideas change. Desires. Health. Work. Intimacy. Energy. People grow older. Sometimes gentler. Sometimes more difficult. Sometimes, for a while, we barely recognize someone. And perhaps that applies to us as well. The promise to love someone is therefore a strange one.

You promise something to a person who will change, from a version of yourself that will not remain the same either. No one knows exactly who will be sitting at the breakfast table twenty years from now. Perhaps lasting love therefore asks, again and again: Who are you now? Not only: Who were you when I first knew you?

This can be especially difficult when trust has been damaged before. Love can then easily become confused with a search for certainty: knowing where the other person is, what they are thinking, whether they will stay. But a relationship can never guarantee that nothing will change or hurt again. Perhaps love sometimes lies precisely in giving space without becoming indifferent. In not possessing the other person, and not allowing yourself to disappear in order to keep them. Two people are allowed to change. They may need to discover again how they fit

together. And sometimes they no longer do. That requires attention. Not the romantic attention of the first weeks, when everything is interesting. Another kind of attention. After years, still asking a question whose answer you do not assume you know. “What is that actually like for you?” And then not filling it in beforehand. Perhaps someone said something different last year. People are allowed to change. A partner is not a book you read once and then know. Nor is a child. Nor a friend. Perhaps love is also the willingness not to finish defining one another too quickly.

And then there is love for people for whom caring becomes more and more demanding. A parent growing older. A partner becoming ill. A child who will always need support. Then love can become heavy. Sometimes literally. Washing. Driving. Waiting. Medication. Appointments. Paperwork. Sleep that disappears. Answering the same question again and again. Perhaps we make this beautiful too easily. Family caregiving as the ultimate expression of love. Devotion. Being there for someone. All of that may be true. And the person caring may at the same time be tired. Angry. Sad. Bored. Overburdened. Sometimes we long for one day on which no one needs anything. That does not make the love less real.

Perhaps we should stop demanding that love is always given with pleasure. Sometimes someone cares lovingly and finds it terribly hard. Both can be true. Perhaps that even applies to parenthood. You can love your child with all your heart and be glad when they finally fall asleep. You can long for an afternoon alone. You can miss your child when they are away and, within an hour of their return, be driven mad by the noise. Love does not make us saints. Thankfully. Otherwise almost no one would qualify.

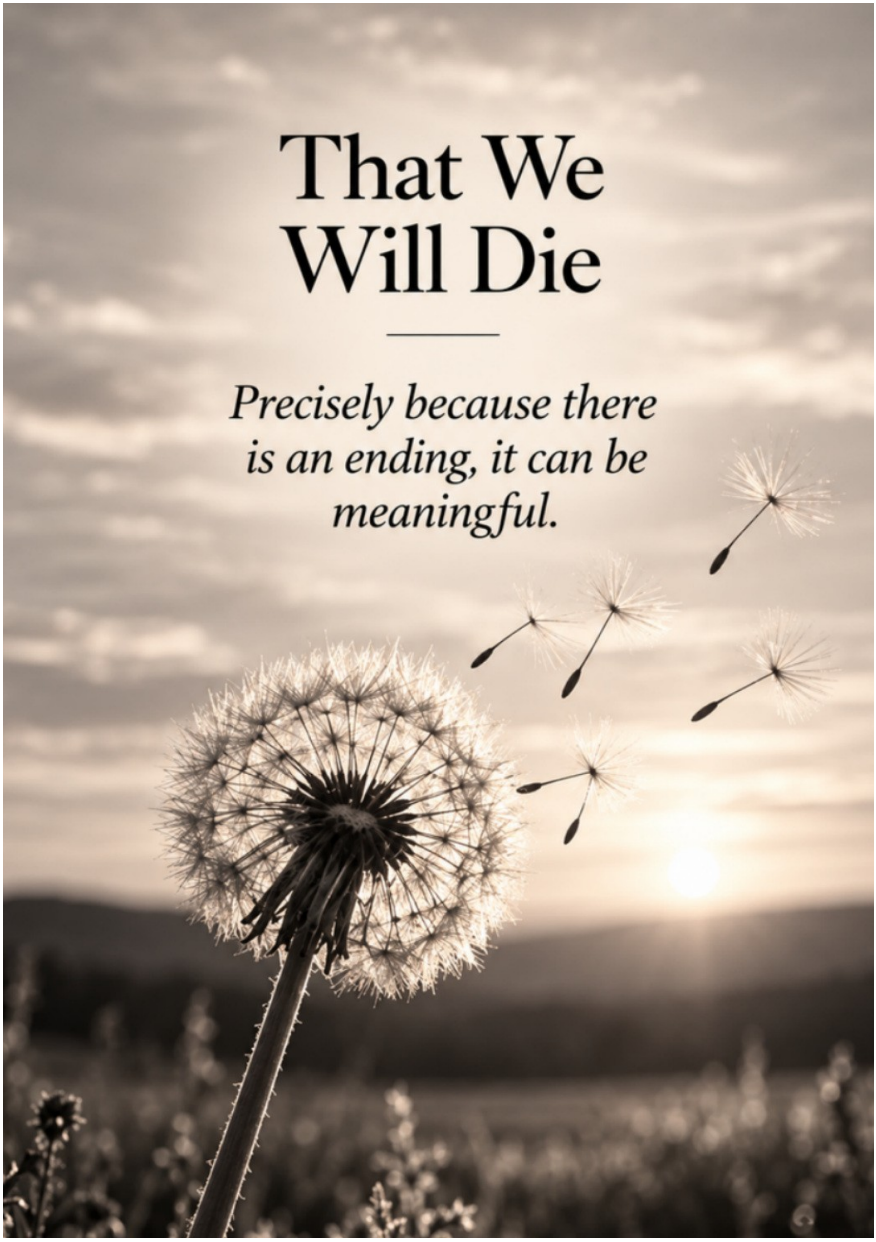
We can also use love as an argument for holding on. But I love you. As though that sentence obliges the other person to stay. Sometimes one of the purest forms of love is precisely to recognize that love is not a certificate of ownership. The other person may say no. Change. Take distance. Choose another life. That can hurt terribly. It may feel anything but loving. But loving someone does not automatically give you a right to their presence.

And what about loving yourself? These days, it almost sounds like an assignment. You must love yourself before anyone else can love you. Perhaps that is asking rather a lot. There are days on which we do not like ourselves very much at all. We make mistakes. Feel insecure. Look in the mirror and see mainly what we would rather change. Perhaps self-love need not mean thinking you are wonderful. Sometimes it resembles the love we give another person. Care. Giving your body food. Sleeping when you are exhausted. Setting a boundary. Seeking help. Not criticizing yourself constantly. Acknowledging a mistake without reducing yourself to that mistake. Perhaps you do not need to be in love with yourself. You can simply treat yourself with a reasonable degree of decency. That would already be quite something.

There are moments when love can no longer change the outcome. A bed, a chair beside it, a body in decline. Being present becomes concrete. Holding a hand, telling a story or sitting in silence together. Not knowing what to say can exist in that room too. You can be dear to someone without knowing exactly how to carry this moment.

Love may be less perfect than we like to portray it. It forgets birthdays. Sometimes looks at a phone while someone is speaking. Says the wrong thing. Is tired. Needs time alone. Argues. Cannot always stay. And yet, sometimes, the

following morning it is back in the kitchen. Two mugs. Coffee. “Did you sleep at all?” Perhaps that is too ordinary for a love story. But a human life consists largely of ordinary days. So perhaps love must live there too. Not only in the great words. Not only in what we feel. In attention. In freedom. In boundaries. In staying when staying is good. In leaving when staying causes harm. In asking again who the other person has become. In a chair beside a bed. In a message: Are you home? In coffee already made. Perhaps love does not need to be spoken constantly in order to be a verb. Sometimes you can simply see it moving.


That We
Will Die
Precisely because there is an ending, it can be meaningful.

That We Will Die

We know it. And most of the time, we do not. That is the curious relationship human beings have with death. We know that every life ends. That our parents will die. That people we love may fall away. That one day, we too will not wake up. No one needs to explain this to us. And yet we put an appointment for next year in our calendar. We save for later. Plant a tree. Book a holiday. Buy shoes for a child to grow into. Say: See you tomorrow. As though tomorrow were an appointment life had made with us.

Perhaps we cannot live any other way. It would be impossible to live constantly with the full awareness of our mortality. You would drink a cup of coffee and think: one day there will be a last cup of coffee. You would say goodbye to your partner and realize: one day we will say this for the last time. You would take your child to school and think of a morning when you will no longer be there. You would look at your own hands and know that one day they will hold nothing again. That is no way to get through an ordinary Tuesday. So we forget. Not truly. More in the way we forget that the earth beneath our feet is moving through space. It is true. But we do not need to feel it every moment in order to live.

Sometimes that natural distance suddenly narrows. Someone dies. You become ill. Someone your age receives bad news. An accident happens nearby. You visit someone in hospital. Or you simply notice that you are growing older. A body sends small messages. A knee that never used to complain. A pair of glasses. A wrinkle that remains when you stop smiling. The first time someone calls you sir or

madam while, inside, you do not feel nearly old enough for it. Perhaps growing older is partly discovering that time is not only something that happens on a clock. It happens to us.

Talking about death can be difficult because there is ultimately a boundary our plans cannot cross. Medicine can save lives and give time, but no one is cured of mortality. What people connect with that awareness differs. For one person, death is a passage or reunion; for another, the end of consciousness. Some people hope, doubt or do not know what they believe. At a grave, you can say something without knowing whether anyone hears you. That uncertainty need not be resolved here.

Perhaps we are not afraid of being dead, but rather of dying. Of pain. Of dependence. Of losing control. Of breathlessness. Of decline. Of saying goodbye. Of what will happen to those who remain. And perhaps of something else: that our life will pass before we have truly lived. That we will reach the end and think: Was that it? Here, the fear of death touches something that is really about life. Not because mortality should urge us to make the absolute most of every day. That sounds beautiful, but it can become rather exhausting. As though even a lazy Sunday were wasted life. As though, on your deathbed, you would regret every afternoon on which you did nothing special. Perhaps doing nothing special is a large part of living.

Live every day as if it were your last sounds decisive. But on my last day, I would probably not work or save for a pension, and I would leave the washing-up. You cannot organize an ordinary life that way.

Realizing from time to time that time is limited can shift something. Especially when later becomes the place where everything waits: when life is quieter, when we have more money, when that problem is solved. Postponement can be wise or unavoidable. It only deserves the occasional question of whether later still fits what we intend.

That need not become a dramatic call to quit your job and travel the world. Perhaps it is much smaller. Call someone. Pay a visit. Tell someone you love them if you already feel it. Take that walk. Use the tableware kept in the cupboard for special occasions. Or simply leave it there if you do not feel like using it. Mortality need not turn us into people who constantly produce meaningful moments. Sometimes it may simply shift, now and then, something in what we consider important.

What will remain of me? We leave possessions, photographs, words and memories behind. But those memories change too. Over time, stories become shorter. Details disappear. The people who knew us personally eventually die themselves. Sometimes the idea that we must be remembered forever becomes another attempt not to disappear completely. But how many people know their great-grandmother's name? She probably once laughed. Had worries. Loved someone. Perhaps one morning she stood in a kitchen and thought her life was terribly important and complicated. It was. To her. To the people around her. A life need not be remembered forever to have been truly lived. Perhaps we also leave a great deal behind without our names remaining attached. A sentence someone once said to you that you repeat to another person years later. A way of offering comfort. A recipe. A joke. A habit. A little kindness. A fear, perhaps, too. People pass things on to

one another constantly without knowing where they will end up. Influence may exist without a signature more often than we think. You do not need to be remembered by the world to have left something in it.

Mortality also changes love. Whoever loves someone knows, somewhere, that parting is possible. Most of the time we keep that knowledge at a distance. Thankfully. But when someone becomes seriously ill, time can suddenly feel different. An afternoon is no longer simply an afternoon. A conversation no longer simply a conversation. Perhaps you want to remember everything. The voice. The hands. The way someone looks at you. What is still being said. And at the same time, ordinary life continues there too. Food needs to be eaten. People need to sleep. Someone asks where the charger is.

There can be laughter in a room where everyone knows the end is near. As long as someone is alive, ordinary life is there too. When a cure is no longer possible, care can still mean a great deal: relieving symptoms, helping someone sit comfortably, listening to what they do or do not want. What is appropriate differs from person to person and calls for skilled guidance where needed. Being present need not become a solemn conversation.

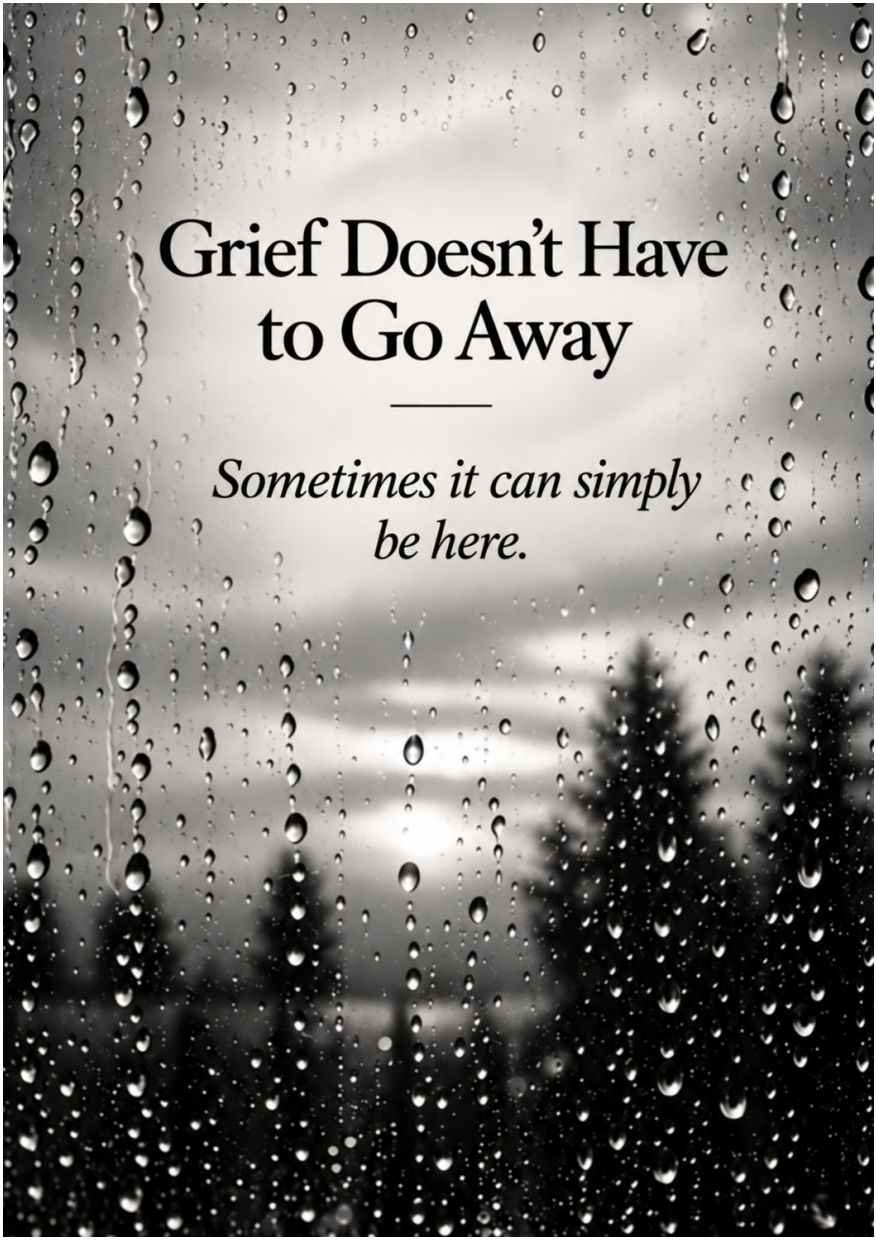
And sometimes a person does not want to talk about death at all. That is allowed too. Not everyone who is dying wants to spend all their time having meaningful conversations. Perhaps someone wants to watch football. Gossip. Sleep. Talk about the grandchildren. Complain about the food. Death need not enter every conversation simply because it has drawn closer. A dying person remains a person. Not only someone who is dying.

An older person is not simply a young person from whom more and more has been taken. Years have also been lived, people known and mistakes made. Old age need not produce wisdom to have dignity.

And our own death? You can read one day I will no longer be here and notice all sorts of things: fear, resistance, curiosity or very little. There is no prescribed feeling for that thought. I notice myself how difficult absence is to imagine. In the picture of a room without me, I am still looking at it. The picture therefore does not tell me what not existing would be like.

Some people find peace in the idea that their life is part of something larger. Others find it in the understanding that nothing needs to last forever in order to be valuable. A song has not failed because it ends. A summer evening is no less beautiful because darkness falls. A conversation need not continue endlessly to be important. Sometimes images like these can touch something in us. But a human being is not a song. And someone you lose is not a sunset. We should not allow comparisons to say more than they can. When someone you love dies, it can simply be terrible. No image can undo that.

We know that we can lose people and become attached anyway. We know that time is limited and sometimes delightfully waste an afternoon. Death need not constantly teach us something. Every now and then, the awareness may be there: this will not last forever. Afterwards, coffee is made, a message is sent and the dog needs to go out. Life need not become spectacular because it is finite.


Grief Doesn't Have to Go Away
Sometimes it can simply be here.

Grief Does Not Have to Go Away

Grief has a curious problem. It often lasts longer than those around us expect. At first, everyone understands. There are flowers. Messages. Telephone calls. People ask how you are. Perhaps food is brought. Practical things need to be arranged. A farewell. Papers. Belongings. People come together. They talk about the person who is no longer there. And afterward, it grows quieter. Not immediately. Slowly. Other lives continue. People have to work. Something new happens. The world moves on. And the person who grieves is left with something that does not move according to the same schedule.

That is one of the loneliest sides of grief. Not only that you miss someone, but that at some point the world stops asking about the person you still miss every day. Their name is spoken less often. Fewer messages arrive. No one means anything wrong by it. Sometimes people simply do not know what to say. They are afraid of stirring up the grief again. As though the grief had been sleeping peacefully until they asked about it. But perhaps it was already there. On waking. While brushing your teeth. In the car. In a song on the radio. In the supermarket, when you saw something you used to bring home. Perhaps a name does not stir grief up. Sometimes it only keeps it company for a moment.

How long has it been now? Three weeks, two years, ten years. Time tells us how long someone has been gone, not how much they meant. Working through it or finding a place for it are words that fit some people. Others hear in them the suggestion that grief must one day be finished. A calendar cannot prescribe the course of missing someone.

A changed room can be an image for loss. You automatically walk toward what is no longer there. Later, you know the new arrangement better. And on an ordinary afternoon, you bump your knee again: a smell, a photograph, someone in the same coat. A difficult day does not erase the lighter days before it. Time has passed, even when a memory briefly brings you very close to the loss.

Nor do we grieve only for people who die. You can grieve for someone who is still alive. A relationship that ends. A friendship that disappears. A parent becoming less recognizable through illness. A child with whom contact has been lost. Someone who has changed. Sometimes that grief is complicated because there is no clear farewell. No funeral. No card. No date everyone understands will be difficult. The person still exists. Just no longer in the same way in your life. What are you supposed to do with your missing them?

A future that never came can be missed too. A child, a profession that illness has made impossible, a body as you knew it. There may be few rituals for these losses. Yet something precious may have been lost: what you had hoped to experience together or alone.

A loss also touches birthdays still to come, journeys that will not be made and conversations that can no longer take place. Beautiful memories are not always comforting. A holiday photograph can show precisely how great the difference from now is.

The way sorrow becomes visible also differs. One person wants to talk, another to work. Someone keeps possessions or gives them away. None of these actions, by itself, tells us how much someone loved.

That can be difficult even within one family. Two people lose the same person. And they do not lose the same thing. A woman loses her husband. A child, their father. A brother, his brother. A friend, their friend. Each relationship had its own history. Its own language. Its own memories. And so the grief is different too. Sometimes pain may arise when we expect the other person to grieve as we do. Why do you never talk about it? Why do you not cry? Why do you want to clear out his things already? Why are you still stuck in it? Sometimes there is no single right way shared by everyone. Only different people around the same empty place.

Sometimes guilt is added to grief. Should I have visited more often? Why did I keep that last call so short? Should I have noticed something sooner? Why was I irritated that day? Could I still have done something? Death has the unpleasant quality of making some questions final. You cannot call again to put something right. Cannot ask once more what someone meant. Cannot still say what you wanted to say. As a result, an ordinary human moment can become enormous afterward. That one argument. The missed call. The time you had no time. But a relationship rarely consists only of its final moment. Perhaps we do not need to judge an entire life together by its final page.

And sometimes there is relief. Guilt can settle over that too. After a long illness, for example. After years of caring. After a complicated relationship. Someone dies. And beside the grief, calm appears. Perhaps even the thought: It is over. That can be frightening. As though relief means that you loved less. But perhaps relief sometimes says only that something truly was heavy. You can miss someone and be glad their suffering has ended. You can grieve and feel that

your own life suddenly has more room again. Those feelings do not have to condemn one another.

Grief need not feel gentle. There can be jealousy of people who still have what you lost, irritation at a happy family or anger toward the person who died. Why did you leave me behind? Even when you know they did not choose to.

And sometimes you feel little. You get up, make coffee and answer messages when you had expected to be unable to do anything. That difference from what you expected need not prove that you loved less. Sorrow may come later or be different from what you imagined. A single reaction cannot tell us the size of someone's loss.

Judging your grief can make it heavier: I should be further along; why does this still affect me? You do not have to hold on to sorrow to take it seriously, or get rid of it because the calendar seems to demand it.

Giving sorrow space is not the same as staying alone with it. When life is barely bearable, or eating, sleeping and looking after yourself become difficult, seeking help is appropriate. You do not have to wait for a particular time to pass or decide for yourself whether your grief is still normal.

A good day can sting when you later realize that you hardly thought of someone. Yet a few hours absorbed in something else is not the same as forgetting them. Traces of that person can remain in your life: an expression, a recipe, the way you comfort someone. You hear yourself say something and think: she always used to say that. Memory can also live in an ordinary action.

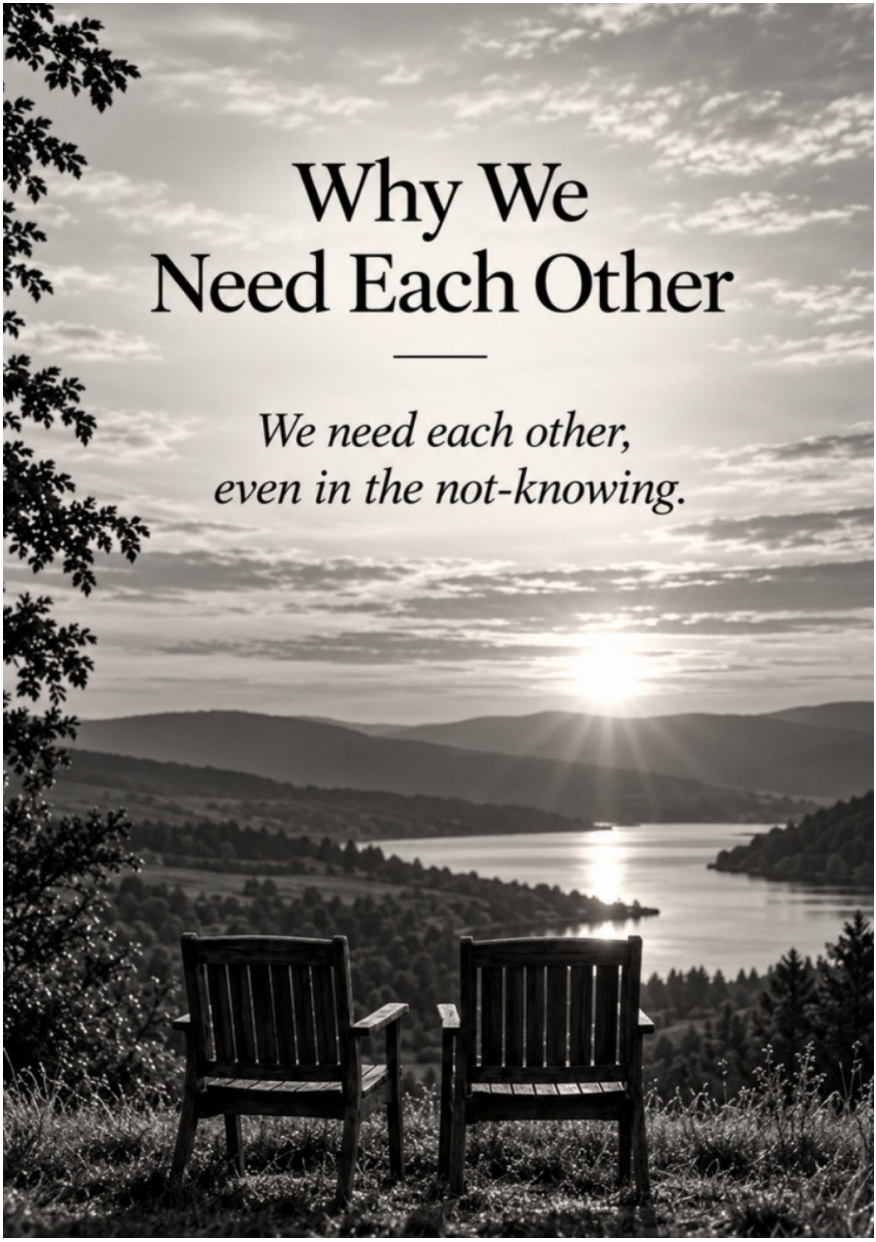
That need not be comforting. It may hurt instead. A memory does not need to be made warm to be allowed to exist.

Perhaps, with time, the question changes too. At first it is: How am I supposed to live without you? Later, perhaps: How do I carry you with me into a life in which you can no longer come along?

There is no prescribed form for that. Someone speaks to the person who died; someone else has no use for that. An object, music or a grave can matter; none is obligatory. Connection does not have to prove that the world is still the same. It can find a place in a life that changes.

Some people we will miss for the rest of our lives. Missing them is not, in itself, proof that we have grieved incorrectly. How heavy it is, what someone needs and how much room remains for the rest of life deserve attention. Another person cannot judge that from the outside.

Have you found a place for it? Perhaps you do not know what to answer. Sometimes grief seems more inclined to move house. You hear little from it for months, and then it is suddenly standing in the kitchen. You can recognize that it is there. And when you are occupied with something else again later, that need not bring guilt either.


Why We
Need Each Other
We need each other,
even in the not-knowing.

Why We Need Each Other

You can spend a day among people and still feel alone. There are voices; you reply, yet no one seems truly with you. Being alone and loneliness do not automatically coincide. A house without appointments can be wonderful when you long for silence. The same room can be painfully quiet when you want to call someone and do not know whom. The room is the same; the silence is not.

Being expected somewhere can mean a great deal. Someone notices when you are absent, knows how you drink your coffee or sees something funny and thinks: I must send him this. I recognize that longing in the ordinary things people keep for one another.

The number of contacts tells us little about how close someone feels to others. You can know many people and dare to call no one when things are difficult. One trusted connection can mean a great deal without having to carry everything a life asks for.

Loneliness can carry something shameful, as though it says something about you. No friends? Why not? Do you spend enough time among people? You have to open yourself up a little too. Join a club. Volunteer. Find a hobby. These are all suggestions that can genuinely help. Contact is difficult to create if you never meet anyone. But loneliness is not always a logistical problem. You can send someone into a crowded room and let their loneliness enter with them. Perhaps company is not what is missing. Perhaps it is recognition. Safety. The feeling that you do not continually have to play a role.

Sometimes we make ourselves smaller in order to belong. We laugh along. Say nothing. Tell only the parts we think

will be received well. Not too heavy. Not too strange. Not too sensitive. Not too much. Perhaps we learn this when we are young. This part of me is valued. That part is better kept hidden. So we lock certain rooms within ourselves when visitors arrive. That can be perfectly all right. Not everyone needs access to everything. But when no one is ever allowed inside, your own house can become lonely.

Perhaps that is why being seen is such a peculiar human need. Someone notices something. “You are quieter than usual.” “I think this affects you.” “You do not have to pretend with me.” That can be almost frightening. For being seen also means that someone may see what you would rather hide: insecurity, sadness, shame, need. Perhaps genuine connection is never entirely without risk. You must allow a part of yourself to appear without knowing what the other person will do with it. We do not take that risk everywhere. Rightly so. Trust need not be unlimited. Not every colleague becomes a friend. Not every family member feels safe. Not everyone who shows interest has a right to your story. Perhaps closeness is valuable precisely because it may be selective. You may decide who comes near, and how near. Yet something special exists when someone is allowed access. You do not need to finish a sentence. A glance is enough. A joke has a history. Silence is not uncomfortable. Perhaps you have not spoken for weeks and simply continue where you left off. Such a connection can begin to feel self- evident until it is no longer there. Then you discover how many small things were carried by one other person.

Connection also grows when nothing is going wrong. Eating together, a trivial message, helping with a cupboard. Ordinary moments can create a familiarity that turns out to matter later.

An encounter need not be long for that to happen. A conversation in a waiting room or with a stranger on the telephone can stay with you. You never meet again, yet something was shared. Even in such a brief contact, two different experiences can touch for a moment.

Recognition can bring relief: you know something of this feeling too. It can also close the conversation too soon when I know exactly how you feel becomes the answer. Your father was not my father; your relationship was not mine. I recognize something, but tell me what it is like for you keeps the question open.

Joy, too, sometimes wants somewhere to go. You receive good news and think: whom shall I call? Come and see what I have made. The result is good. He has taken his first step. Sharing can be part of the experience.

That does not diminish the value of independence. Yet we live with much help that has become almost invisible: language others taught us, work others do, food that passed through other hands. Independence exists among all those connections.

Depending on others has a poor reputation. We do not want to be a burden. You hear that often. I do not want to burden my children. I do not want to complain. They are busy enough themselves. There is something loving in that. We want to consider one another. But perhaps the wish never to be a burden can also make us lonely. A relationship in which no one may ever need anything from the other remains strangely empty. Perhaps burdens sometimes belong to connection. Not every burden. Not always. Not without boundaries. But still: Could you help me for a moment? May I call you? Would you come with me? Allowing someone to give can also be a form of trust. Perhaps we sometimes find giving easier than receiving. Helping gives us a role. We

know what to do. Receiving asks something else: admitting that we cannot do something alone; allowing someone to see us when we are not strong; accepting that we may be unable to give anything in return. That can be uncomfortable.

Yet reciprocity does not mean immediately repaying every kindness. Perhaps you carry me today, and I carry you another time. Or someone else. Perhaps human relationships need not be a ledger. That does not mean every relationship is equally balanced. Some people will need more care for a long time than they can return: a child, someone with a disability, an ill partner, a parent who becomes increasingly dependent. If human worth depended on how much a person could give back, we would build a very harsh world. Perhaps dignity exists before that calculation.

You do not have to earn your place among people by being useful enough. That sounds grand, but perhaps it appears mainly in small things. Is someone looked at when they speak? Is someone discussed as though they were not in the room? May someone take the time they need? Is a question answered again? Are people laughing with someone, or at them? Humanity sometimes resides in seconds. Waiting a moment. Looking at someone. Asking: What do you want? Not impressive. Still important. This applies at home, but also in places where care is professionally organized. An institution needs schedules, records, protocols, handovers, and responsibilities. Without structure, care does not become more humane. Yet within that structure something simple remains important: the person for whom the care exists must not disappear behind the system. And the parent, partner, or loved one who depends on that care remains more than a question, a complaint, or a file. Good

care and human closeness need not belong to different worlds.

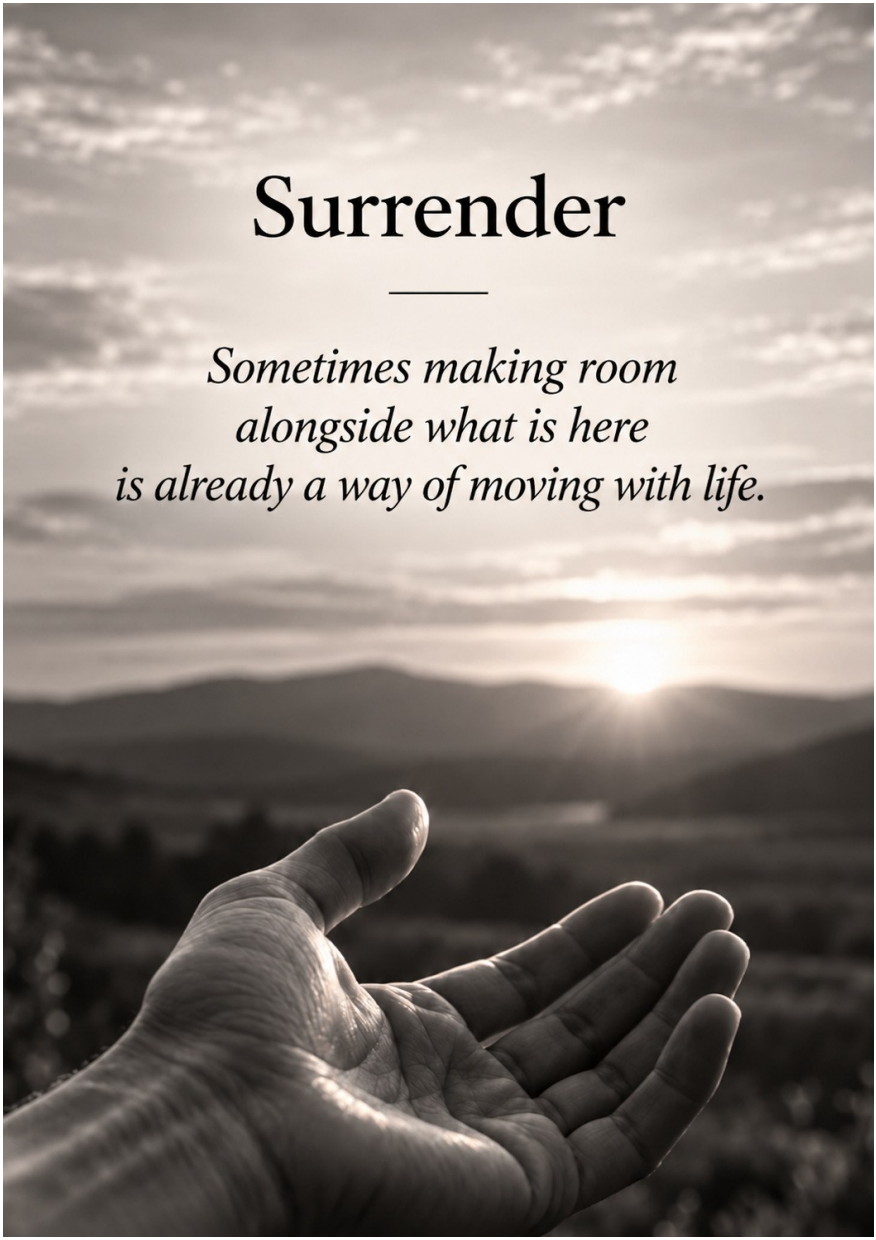
Closeness can be difficult. Social situations can be exhausting, earlier contacts may have been unsafe or someone may feel little understood. You have to let people in is then too simple. A first conversation, suitable support or professional help may be a beginning. What someone needs must be explored with them.

Accessible places matter too: a library, community center, association or table where coffee is served. Not every place suits everyone, and friendship cannot be made to order. Seeking contact can involve discomfort, rejection and disappointment. Sometimes people really are absent; a beautiful thought about connection does not fill that emptiness.

A greeting from a neighbor or being recognized at the checkout can mean something too. There are different distances at which we can exist in one another's lives.

For whom can I be there in some small way? That question can stand alongside the longing for company without making contribution a condition of belonging. A message, an invitation, remembering a name. Asking how someone is and wanting to hear the answer too.

Care can mean listening, and also arranging something, calling in help or setting a boundary. We do not need a solution forevery pain to matter to one another. Sometimes there is sorrow that wants to be spoken, good news that wants somewhere to go or a day that someone else may witness for a while. A place where someone knows that you are here.


Surrender
Sometimes making room
alongside what is here
is already a way of moving with life.

Surrender

Surrender can sound as if you have lost: hands raised, the struggle over. That is not what I mean here. Some things call for effort, protection and resistance. The desire for change has its place.

I use surrender to mean acknowledging what is true in this moment without saying that it is good. This person is no longer here. My body has changed. I am angry. I cannot manage today. An honest sentence need not yet bring a peaceful feeling.

Between how things are and how we wish they were, we look for a way forward. We seek treatment, speak to someone or try to make amends after an argument. Sometimes, at the same time, we reach for what cannot return: the time before the phone call, before the farewell, before the mistake.

Acknowledgement does not stand in the way of help or change. Treatment, protection and practical support remain necessary where the situation calls for them. Safety matters more than a beautiful thought about surrender. No one has to regard unnecessary suffering as an achievement.

Knowing something is over and living with it do not always keep pace. You still look at your phone. Compare your body with how it used to be. Replay a conversation in your head. Surrender is not a switch you turn once. Sometimes, for a few seconds, you notice: this is how it is. And later, you do not want it again.

Even surrender can become a performance. I have to accept this. I should be further along. Then the old struggle receives a new assignment. Some days you do not want to

accept what is here. You cry, swear or long for your old life. The sentence I do not want this also describes something that is truly present. Acknowledgement need not be serene.

That can happen in the middle of ordinary life: a kitchen full of washing-up, a waiting room, a mind that keeps worrying. You notice a thought and go on peeling potatoes. Another time, you cannot keep your attention on anything else. There need not be a measuring stick beside it.

The question of usefulness can press itself upon a life. What have I contributed? What will I leave behind? People find direction in work, care, faith, art or love. For me, human dignity remains even when someone cannot give those answers. That is a conviction, not an outcome a life must first demonstrate.

For me, that has become an important part of surrender: life need not wait entirely until everything within me has been resolved. I can hope for less inner turmoil and live in the meantime. Someone can acknowledge a diagnosis and still ask for different care. Acknowledgement and change can exist side by side.

That does not mean everyone has access to that space now. Exhaustion, circumstances and a lack of support can fill almost an entire day. This thought need not become an assignment either. Another person can help carry something without your first having to find a different attitude.

Somewhere along the road there is a bench. You can sit down without knowing which way you will go next. What lies behind you does not change. Perhaps someone sits beside you. Perhaps you are alone. A car passes. A bird lands, then takes flight again. After a while, perhaps you get up. The bench stays where it is.

Afterword

The pages end here. What is happening in your life does not thereby reach a conclusion. Tomorrow, something may touch you again, or it may be an ordinary day on which you have little need for grand thoughts.

You may have recognized something, skipped a page or disagreed with a thought. There is no assignment for tomorrow. What you find useful may come with you; what does not fit may stay here.

While writing, surrender came to mean less that something disappears, and more that space can emerge alongside what remains. That became my exploration, not a standard for how another person should live with pain.

From here, the road is yours again. I hope this book has kept you a little company along the way. It need not be more than that.

Responses to Chapters

I received these responses to the individual chapters named below.

Not Needing to Be Fixed

“I feel you offering a welcome to me the reader. When I am concerned for another person, you offer me another way—a manner to join that person in what it is they’re going through: ‘Would you like to tell me about it?’ With that genuine offer to be present to them in their disquiet or their affair, the possible connection seems greater, and other than fixing the problem that the writer wants to share.”

Will Stillwell
Center for Studies of the Person – Global

When the Darkness Comes

“There is not always a solution, nor any guarantee that you will get over something. But what the author does show is the possibility of looking further, of keeping the whole landscape in view. The author’s empathy and the caring precision with which he chooses his words make the text not only highly readable, but also deeply encouraging.”

Marijke Dijkstra
Facilitator of a reading group at the Etty Hillesum Centre

Love as a Verb

“Your text reflects all the central characteristics of love as described in The Art of Loving. The way you make all this clear is very convincing and fits so well with our everyday experience.”

Dr. Rainer Funk
Psychoanalyst and Literary Executor of Erich Fromm

Sources and Origins

This book grew from personal experience, reading, listening and reflection. It describes a way of looking and offers neither a survey of psychological research nor instructions for treatment. The examples explore possible experiences; they do not explain how every person responds.

Viktor Frankl, Carl Rogers, Etty Hillesum, Dirk De Wachter, Nelson Mandela, Erich Fromm, Irvin Yalom, Thich Nhat Hanh, Rumi and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, have offered inspiration. Their names are not evidence for the statements in this book. The text is not a summary of their work and does not claim to give a complete account of their thought.

The first words emerged during a period when I was seeking a way to live with what could not be resolved. This grew into an independent, reflective book within De Vrede van Overgave, The Peace of Surrender. ChatGPT by OpenAI was used as a writing and editing partner in organizing, rewriting and developing the text. The direction of the content and the personal choices are mine.

I received the responses at the back to individual chapters. The relevant chapter is named with each response. The quotations have been reproduced unchanged.

After the book was completed, Dr. Rainer Funk, psychoanalyst, former personal assistant and literary executor of Erich Fromm, read the chapter Love as a Verb. In his response, he confirmed that the text reflects the central characteristics of Fromm's understanding of love. He also drew attention to Fromm's ideas about biophilia and to the social influences that shape how love is understood and practiced. His response is included with his explicit permission.

Will Stillwell, affiliated with the Center for Studies of the Person - Global, read the English translation of the chapter Not Needing to Be Fixed. In his response, he recognized how the chapter invites the reader not to immediately advise or change another person, but to connect with genuine attention to what they are going through. For him, this was expressed in the simple question: “Would you like to tell me about it?” His response is included with his explicit permission.

Marijke Dijkstra, an expert on the work of Etty Hillesum and facilitator of a reading group at the Etty Hillesum Centre, read the chapter When the Darkness Comes. She recognized in it much of Hillesum's attitude to life: the courage to look without judgment at what is dark, to find comfort in surrender, and at the same time to keep the whole landscape in view. Her response is also included with her explicit permission.

For Inspiration

Below are some questions that the work of different thinkers raised for me. These are personal impressions from reading, not direct quotations or scientific evidence for the chapters.

Viktor Frankl - his work helped me look at the small space that sometimes remains when circumstances can no longer be changed.

Carl Rogers - reminded me of how much can emerge when someone is not immediately judged, explained, or repaired.

Etty Hillesum - her diaries led me to the question of how an inner space can relate to a dark and uncertain world outside.

Dirk De Wachter - gave words to the idea that a person does not need to be constantly happy to still lead a valuable life.

Nelson Mandela - raised the question for me of how much space the past is still given today, without denying what actually happened.

Erich Fromm - led me to the thought that love becomes visible in attention, care and action.

Irvin Yalom - invited reflection on how awareness of mortality touches our relationship with life.

Thich Nhat Hanh - his focus on presence and grief helped me search for a way in which pain is allowed to be there without having to disappear immediately.

Rumi - touched upon the ability not to have to understand everything and yet remain open to what cannot be captured in an answer.

Further Reading

Some works for further reading on the themes of this book. This is a reading list, not evidence for the statements in the chapters or a reconstruction of the editions used in the original writing.

Viktor E. Frankl - Man’s Search for Meaning. English-language edition. Publisher: Beacon Press. Publisher or author website

Carl R. Rogers - On Becoming a Person. A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy. Publisher: HarperCollins. Publisher or author website

Erich Fromm - The Art of Loving. Digital edition: Open Road Media. Publisher or author website

Etty Hillesum - Het verzameld werk. Dagboeken en brieven. Collected diaries and letters in Dutch. Publisher: Balans. Publisher or author website

Irvin D. Yalom - Staring at the Sun. Overcoming the Terror of Death. Publisher: Jossey-Bass, 2008. Publisher or author website

Perhaps what is here
does not always have to be
all there is.

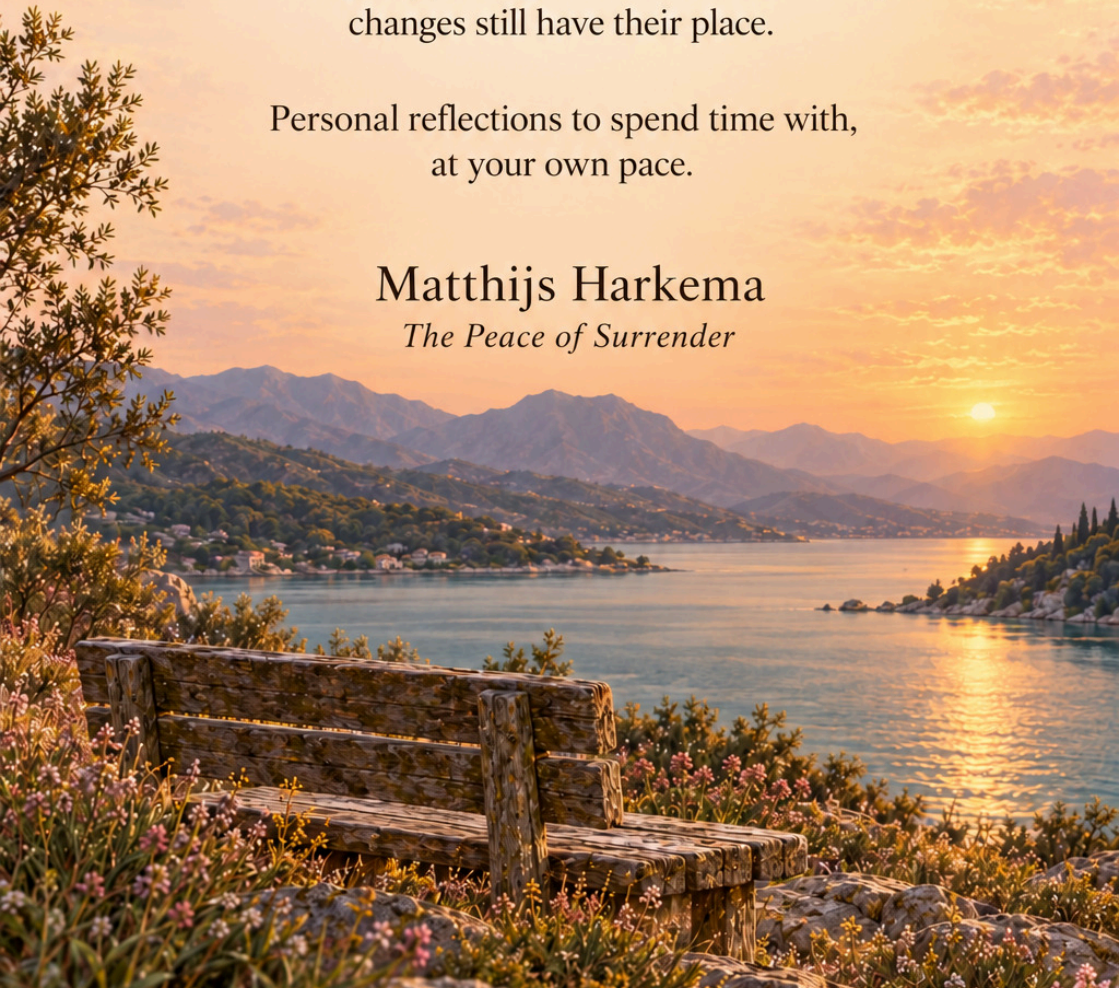
Living with What Cannot Be Resolved

How do you live when not everything turns out well?

About loss and love, inner turmoil, grief and the need for someone who stays. This book explores what can exist alongside what is difficult, without diminishing it.

Acknowledgement does not rule out action. Seeking help, setting boundaries and making changes still have their place.

Personal reflections to spend time with, at your own pace.



Matthijs Harkema

The Peace of Surrender