

FROM STRUGGLE TO FREEDOM

HOPE



A TALE OF
Transformation

PHIL HATHAWAY

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This book is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. The reader should regularly consult a physician in matters relating to his/her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

“Take that rose bush, for example. We are all looking at the same plant, but our perception of it varies according to the way we each think and see. One person may see a vigorous rose, another may see a rose that could benefit from a little pruning, and a third may see a mess that no amount of attention would save. The rose bush isn’t changing; it’s the way we personally perceive it that differs, the way each of us thinks that colours our perception.”

Sydney Banks

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Sydney Banks. *The Enlightened Gardener*. Edmonton, AB: Lone Pine Publishing, 2001.

“When you get up each day, think of doing something good.”

Eva Mozes Kor.

Holocaust survivor.

“When our thoughts look real, we live in a world of suffering. When they look subjective, we live in a world of choice. When they look arbitrary, we live in a world of possibility. And when we see them as illusory, we wake up inside a world of dreams.”

Michael Neill

Transformative coach and best-selling author.

DEDICATIONS

To Grandad George.

You were taken from this world when your grandchildren
were all little nippers.

But from the few memories I cherish
and from the stories our Mum and Dad have told us about you ...

We are kindred spirits!

I know you, Grandad.

I know you.

To my wonderful Mum & Dad, my brothers Stephen, Ian & Kristian and my sister, Deborah.

If I could do it all again—I'd choose you.
I love you always.

And to my partner, Andrew.

I love you.
Keep being you.
Forever yours.

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Foreword Forewarned

From the outset, I promised myself I would break self-help tradition in writing this book.

There are already hordes of books in this genre following a familiar pattern:

'Maybe you're feeling anxious and depressed? Perhaps you're stressed and lost in life? Well, simply follow the powerful steps and action plans laid out in this book and practise, practise, practise. And remember to memorise, take notes when you can, change your behaviours, think more positively and hey-presto, your outlook on life will change. You'll feel more relaxed, and life will be wonderful.

Now, let's begin with step one ...'

This book is not *that* book.

A note from Phil

I'm not a psychotherapist.

I'm not a psychologist.

I'm not a counsellor.

I'm not a therapist.

I'm not a caregiver.

I'm not an adviser.

I'm not at all religious.

I'm no wiser than you.

I'm no better than you.

I'm human.

You are too.

Let's look together to see what that means.

The Gates



On the eleventh hour,
of the eleventh day,
of the eleventh month,
the sun shines through the open gate,
onto the laurel wreath below.

Printed with kind permission:

Sculptor: Ian Rank-Broadley FRBS & The Armed Forces Memorial,
National Memorial Arboretum, Staffordshire, UK

Author's Introduction

“Welcome home.”

Those were the first two words Michael spoke.

It was 9:00 a.m., sometime in January 2012. I was keen to begin my first day's training in Santa Monica, California, with the world-renowned coach and trainer Michael Neill.

Michael had chosen his words of welcome carefully, though it took a while for me to grasp he was referring to a 'home' unconnected to that classroom or any other time or place on earth, for that matter. He pointed to a far more profound *home*—one that's inherently universal and freely available to everyone, no matter who or where they are.

On hearing Michael's welcome words, the whole classroom erupted into spontaneous applause. Swept up in the excitement, I clapped and cheered, too, oblivious as to why. After all, home for me lay over 5,000 miles away in the cold and rainy streets of a wintery London.

I was 47 years old, going on 37, moderately successful, and enjoying a beautiful relationship of seven years with my Partner. I'd been running my own business for fifteen years while working part-time as a therapist for ten. It was a rich and bountiful life. I didn't particularly want to change anything; I didn't change anything. But a whirlwind of sorts was now hurtling towards me at a rate of knots. Given time, it would sweep me from my feet and change my life forever. Life has a strange way of throwing a curveball.

Let me take you further back to the turn of the Millennium, twelve years before that momentous morning in Los Angeles. I was 36, going on 76 and suffering from at least five years of chronic anxiety. Over twenty years later, it remains awkward to own up to that fact. I confess to having been a covert anxiety sufferer, lovingly deceitful, hiding behind my happy-go-lucky camouflage. I was 'fine,' had anyone asked, 'just having an off day.'

My body had loftier plans and decided to own up to anxiety on my behalf. Migraines and fatigue pinned me to the bed, helplessness pinned me to the bottle, and irritable bowel pinned me to the loo. I even found walking challenging, with each delicate and uneasy step sending a shockwave of pain throughout my body. And proprioception, that sense of knowing where your body is within space, became my new watchword as I often didn't

know where my arms were in relation to my body. I figured I was months, if not weeks, away from becoming bedridden.

The medical profession did its utmost. There were visits to a neurologist, who prescribed potent medication for the debilitating migraines, as well as medicines for the low-grade, unrelenting headaches and constant dizziness. I also underwent an electromyography test to determine why my arms didn't know up from down and left from right, along with two brain MRI scans to look for something more sinister. Additionally, I had a lumbar puncture, or spinal tap, to inspect the cerebrospinal fluid for other unseen nasties. It most definitely didn't seem I was 'home.'

In expressing all this, I simply want you to know I'm writing from personal experience, but that's where the matter ends. There's no hope to be found in trawling through the darkest days of my past or digging through the mud of old anxieties. All I want you to know here is that I intimately understand chronic anxiety, stress, and feelings of hopelessness, and I see the havoc these issues can wreak upon the body and life if left unchecked.



I'm making an assumption here. You've stumbled upon this book, and you're looking for something to better your life? Maybe you're looking for those all-important steps to take you to the next level, to bring about a more wonderful life. Who wouldn't want that? I've been there, too, more times than I care to mention. Yet this book does not venture to tell you *how* you should live your life. There's no attempt to implement new life strategies, no suggestions on fixing yourself to become a better person, and no next steps to practise.

No tips, steps or strategies? Then why should you bother to take the time to turn these pages? Brevity is not my forte. I'll answer as briefly as I'm able.

There's a fork in the road, and you're at the junction with a signpost pointing in opposing directions. One choice meanders along the well-trodden and innocent path of misunderstanding, constant fixes, self-development and a continuous sense of never being 'home.' It's a direction of looking outwards to circumstances, wondering what's 'out there' causing your stress, who and what's to blame, and then striving to change, improve or remove the apparent cause. Alas, it's a path of coping and self-management, often leading to frustration, dissatisfaction and hopelessness.

The opposite direction, the other road, is life's curveball. It's a whirlwind of a journey toward deeper understanding, looking within to what's always

true and away from often unnecessary self-development, hacks and quick fixes.

Who are you? What principles are operating within and before you that allow you to experience life in the first place? And how can understanding these *truths* transform your life without you having to do, fix, improve or change anything? Simply put, it's a path towards freedom, home, unbridled potential and infinite hope.

In coaching, I love to use the word disruption. This other direction does not merely attempt to tinker at the edges of life; it turns the whole of psychology, the totality of everything you believe about yourself and the world, inside out. It disrupts the very foundations of how you thought life worked and, out of those ashes, forms a life with more grace, compassion, creativity, clarity of mind and hope. You may find yourself living within precisely the same circumstances, but *your experience* of those circumstances will be different—it has to be.

So, why would anyone consciously choose to take the first path at the fork? Well, I don't believe we do *intentionally* take that path. Still, unfortunately, and quite innocently, that's where many of us find ourselves and perhaps explains why chronic anxiety may be today's number-one mental health condition. And the implications of that chronic anxiety upon individuals, communities, businesses, and society are beyond measure.

I tuned in to a mental health and well-being radio show this morning. The guest presenter, a psychologist, said something that caused me to gag on my coffee. Her words brought home how profoundly disruptive the understanding presented in this book is to the currently accepted model. She talked of people with mental health issues and said, (I'm paraphrasing here) 'Look, if you were to lose an arm, you'd know it wouldn't grow back – but you'd learn to cope. And that's how it is for people with mental health issues. They need to learn how to cope. And that's my job, to help them to cope.'

By the time you've finished this book, I'd like to think you, too, would gag on your coffee at such a statement. Who wants life to be an exercise in coping and mind management?

So that's why you should continue to turn these pages. Because you're curious about what's on offer and beyond, or before, coping? So, the direction of this book, *looking within*, is an effortless yet rewarding direction replete with gems beyond your imagination. But that's not to say there aren't remarkable experiences and fun material things *out there* because there

are, by the bucket load. But your orientation and understanding profoundly influence your enjoyment and appreciation of them and the ease with which you uncover them.

For the record, every symptom that hitched a ride on the back of my anxiety evaporated one week in 2000. It took another twelve years until I stumbled across the signpost pointing to the other path to comprehend how that change transpired. At the time, I believed the changes I'd made to my life circumstances had been the precursor to my much-improved condition. But I'd innocently missed something fundamental, something sitting under the nose of everyone on this planet. And this shift in direction is bidding its time, and once you see it, you'll come home too. Or at least, you'll know where home is and which path to take, no steps, strategies, or how-tos.'

This book is *that* book.

You may wonder why I chose to call this book 'Hope.' My inspiration for that title derives from the image towards the front of this book: the sculpture titled 'The Gates,' by the phenomenal sculptor Ian Rank-Broadley¹, FRBS.

I'd been to visit the National Arboretum with my Partner and Parents. The Arboretum is a wonderful place for solitude and contemplation. I'd recommend it to anyone, especially those interested in history and the wars that have brought the world to its knees.

We'd strolled solemnly amongst the tributes to those who'd fallen, a place where statues and photographs from wars worldwide portray the awful horror, loss, bravery, and stupidity of those (and these) times.

Suddenly, I was stopped dead in my tracks, confronted by this imposing male sculpture pointing through a magnificent, partially open doorway. He stood one-and-a-quarter times human height, modest enough to appear mortal, large enough to convey something far more significant. I won't recount how many thoughts and reflections sped through my mind, though one notion I remember stood out more powerfully: the sculpture points *towards* infinite hope.

I also considered the sculpture could be interpreted as pointing us *away from* our misunderstandings about life, guiding us from the innocent but erroneous beliefs and concepts we often hold dear that drag us towards stress, pain and suffering. And these delusions belie truth, convincing us we're a victim of circumstance as they deliver us into the hungry and willing hands of chronic anxiety, insecurity, lack of self-esteem, confidence, mental

suffering, and the selfishness, hate, and greed that ultimately lead to the futility and misery of war.

An equally impressive, though less well-known, sculptor works near my home. He's a woodcarver whose workshop is a spectacle of wooded clutter and intricate carvings. Each day, as I pass by, the woodcutter is hunched over a large wooden table, an altar overflowing with a dazzling array of tools and dripping gluepots. Secretly, I've nicknamed him Geppetto, the obvious alias, I thought. I regularly wave to him. Should he catch sight of me through the dusted windows, he nods with a kindly smile.

On one occasion, Geppetto lay in wait to ambush me. Within minutes, I'd had a guided tour, and afterwards, he took up a block of wood and, with mallet and chisel in hand, he chipped, tapped and sanded as though life itself purred beneath his fingertips. I watched patiently, the tiniest and most intricate transformation unfolding. He moulded and shaped the wood, one potential form taking shape out of a sea of infinite possibility.

Geppetto profoundly appreciates the creative potential. He recognises that a creative spark is forever there, bubbling beneath the surface, waiting for him to tap on its shoulder or vice-versa. It's there for all of us, too, no matter who you may be or how stuck you might find yourself. Regrettably, a camouflage of insidious and insecure personal thinking often binds us to the false assumption that our creative potential is in limited supply, which to my detriment, has left me wanting more times than I care to mention.

For example, one day, whilst at work, I received a phone call from a close friend. Something terrible had happened. I stood devastated, unable to speak. I gathered myself, insisting I'd hurry over to offer my shoulder and an ear.

The journey to her house was an hour's drive, which, at least for the first half, I managed safely through a steady stream of distressing and distracted thinking. And while trying to figure out what to say upon arrival, a hundred disturbing scenarios played out in my mind. How could I keep myself together? What if her Partner were there too? How should I react? It was a strange mixture of upset, frustration, anger and fear. The further I drove, the more discouraged I felt, and the darker seemed the inevitable outcome.

But something extraordinary occurred just past the halfway mark. I'd randomly glanced towards an empty and seemingly infinite field of grass to my right. *And that was all.* I clearly remember this visceral sense of being connected to that field. It was, quite simply, a field of inconsequential green

grass. But my mind, it seemed, had collapsed in upon itself, and all that was left was space—lots of it.

I wound down the car window, breathed in the cold, bracing air, and laughed aloud. The scene, had anyone been watching, would have seemed entirely ridiculous, and yet, I felt free, and the world seemed beautiful. And, as peculiar as it sounds, I could no longer get back to those feelings of anger, upset, fear and frustration—they somehow seemed distant and no longer a part of my then-current reality. The new reality I was now experiencing felt spacious, light and hopeful, and I knew exactly *who* I could be upon arrival at my friend's; *I could be me*.

What had gone before, I realised, was simply a misunderstanding on my behalf. I'd innocently become the victim of distorted thinking to create an insecure and scary view of reality. I'd been lost in the noise of thought and entirely misunderstood, in that moment, how life experience truly works.

I parked on my friend's driveway, still feeling elated yet calm. I tapped on the door. My friend's forlorn face peeped through the now partially open doorway. Our eyes met, and I smiled as I leaned in to hug her. Behind, a few safe steps away, her Partner crept into the hallway, head down, not daring to meet my gaze. I walked up to him, and we hugged too. It was a beautiful, unexpected and tender moment.

The awful scenarios I'd painted *did not* become a reality. Instead, we spent a wonderful afternoon bathed in gorgeous feelings and immersed in the most fun, relaxed and bountiful conversations. But what had to happen for that change in the outcome to transpire? How could I have shifted from such a pitiful and helpless state of mind with no hope of resolution—to quiet, tranquil clarity? And how had the outcome, *without any intervention*, turned itself entirely on its head?

What happened within that stressed state of mind as I gazed into that field? Put simply, I believe a less contaminated view of reality saved the day. Once we recognise our reality comes to us via thought, it stands *to reason and logic* that a new thought will shift our reality—it has to.

And that potential for new thought, to have a deeper connection to life's infinite potential and, therefore, a less contaminated view of reality, *is* the direction of this book. And *insightfully* understanding that potential as a forever present possibility *is* the road to freedom. Sadly though, we're often like poorly driven, high-performance vehicles, floundering in the wrong gear with low-grade fuel, muddied windows, tractionless wheels, and wondering why we're stuck.



As you read on, you'll possibly notice that the word 'understanding' appears frequently. Here are two simple examples of why that's the case.

A while back, I treated myself to hire a high-spec car. Coasting along, minding my own business, I became preoccupied with a flashing light on what resembled the dashboard of a Boeing 737. 'Oh my,' I thought, 'a faulty hire car.' I jabbed frantically at several buttons until—voila, the flashing light disappeared, sorted. Moments later, however, the light flickered again.

The further I drove, the more the light flashed, the deeper my frustration, and the less attentive my driving. Oddly, the road seemed busier and much more perilous. It was just before pulling into the next parking area to gather myself when I had my Scooby-Doo moment – 'duh!' Of course, the light flashed when it was time to shift gears. How could I have misunderstood? In hindsight, the function of the warning light seemed obvious. But the more anxious I became, the less clear my mind, the worse my performance, the more the light flashed and the less likelihood I would see the blindingly obvious. That's life in a nutshell. Once I had understood, oh my, the drive was heavenly. The engine was spared, and I became king of the road.

As a further example, a client recently exclaimed, halfway through our first session, 'I loathe my business, resent my staff and customers, and would give anything to walk away. And even worse,' she said, 'the love and deep connection I used to feel for my husband is practically non-existent. So, maybe it's me? Perhaps I'm a terrible person?'

I'm sure you can imagine my client's deep distress and seemingly hopeless predicament. *But convinced her self-diagnosis was a distortion based upon an innocent misunderstanding*, we looked to the Principles behind life—the understanding pointed to within this book. And with gentle, loving and provocative dialogue, we considered who was indeed in the driving seat here. Was it her job, clients' demands or husband's behaviour? Or perhaps something more fundamental and profoundly transformative once insightfully understood?

I remember her, at one point, staring ahead as though startled by fast-approaching headlights. And with a quizzical and elated facial expression, she exclaimed, 'Oh my God, there's something else at the steering wheel here, isn't there? And it's influencing and underpinning everything.'

To her, that unexpected outburst was a revelation. From that moment, understanding and realisation *from within* became the driver, or direction, of our conversations. She switched gear into an uplifted, more hopeful, less

personal path of enquiry. And very quickly, without intervention, without steps and practises, she was done.

So, understanding is the key to any system, whether it's as simple as driving a car or as profound as living a wonderful life. However, intellectual understanding—like figuring things out through concentrated and procedural thinking—is largely ineffective and counterproductive in this context.

This book, then, points to an understanding—a deep knowing that pre-exists within everyone. Therefore, the true meaning of understanding here is a realisation, an uncovering and awakening of yourself from within. Nobody can do this for you or bestow it upon you. It has to be *your* realisation, *your* shift in consciousness, *your* knowing.

So, I've endeavoured to present this understanding of hope and potential in a simple story rather than a typical step-by-step instruction manual. The characters, the story, and the setting merely serve as vehicles to bring this pre-existing understanding to your attention and awaken you to who you already are. This understanding, moving forward, acts as an amplifier—illuminating the underlying Principles behind, making them more apparent—while also serving to mitigate the misunderstandings that trick us into believing there are no Principles, that we're mere puppets hanging from, and beholden to, the threads of circumstance.

In conclusion: this book *is not* about therapy, coaching or how to work with a client. The book's sole purpose is to point to the infinite potential that allows you to carve out a beautiful life that works for you. It's a welcome signpost at one of life's many junctions. So come with me, walk along a different path, and take the other fork in the road.

A word of caution; the tale here is often melancholic and somewhat unforgiving. But behind the scenes, the direction is genuinely a story of hope, forgiveness, love and understanding. I hope you enjoy it.

I'm about to take you to the theatre to witness today's performance of 'Hope—A Tale of Transformation.' But first, I'd love to introduce you to the show's principal character, Charlie. The Evening Herald, our local newspaper, has been promoting Charlie's show, and their Arts reporter, Den Perry, has kindly offered us a preview of his interview with Charlie recorded earlier this week.

Here's a copy of Den's interview:

Charlie's Interview

EVENING HERALD NEWS

By Den Perry

Have you ever fallen over in deep snow? Or collapsed backwards, arms playfully outstretched, to create a snow angel? There's a delicate crunch and welcome relief as the soft, deep snow cushions your fall. Some conversations can have that same effect.

I'd arrived early, leaving ample time to locate the most private, interview-friendly nook. It's a posh hotel, silverware and stiff-upper-lip type of place, though more pleasant than stuffy.

Charlie arrived as the grandfather clock hit the first chime of 3:00. The first impressions were all very encouraging. Not only punctual and polite but also smartly dressed in casual designer jeans, a colourful silky shirt, and a flowing overcoat. All a perfect match for the hotel's silver-service afternoon cream tea.

Background information on Charlie had been stingier than birthday presents given to those born on Christmas Day. A colleague, pardon her unrefined choice of words, offered up one snippet, 'I'd heard a few years back Charlie was fit for a straight-jacket.' Yet I'd read one of Charlie's recent blog posts describing how years of anxiety and depression fell away, and out of the ashes, a wonderfully abundant life had created itself. Charlie, it seemed, was a fusion of contradictions. On the one hand, life had once dealt Charlie a tough hand. And yet, sat opposite, and quite contrary to my colleague's harsh words, was a character as effervescent, confident and humbled as anyone I'd ever met. I was intrigued beyond measure.

Pleasantries behind us, I was all ears as Charlie described the highlights of a five-year project working in remote parts of East Africa to tutor 'underprivileged' children.

"From scratch, in a barren outpost, initially with no electricity or machinery, we built a two-storey community school suitable for more than 100 children. It became our classroom, community centre, hospital, and our home. We taught the curriculum by day, and at night, we taught my program, 'Waking Up to a Wonderful Life.' That was my true passion, and

the kids lapped it up. And they transformed too because they were curious and happy to look where we were pointing.”

Charlie’s phone had found its way onto the intricately carved tabletop, and as seems to be custom these days, we laughed as we leaned in together, heads almost banging, swiping through dozens of heart-warming and heart-wrenching photos. Most photos were of kids, all teeth and radiant eyes buried within a sea of turmeric and azure blue and gathered around Charlie as though the latest internet megastar had arrived at the village.

The school, however, appeared remote beyond words, a barren and sand-swept backdrop rudely interrupted by this stark grey slab buried beneath a rusty and twisted tin roof. It resembled a derelict hut on the moon.

I assumed we’d talk about anxiety, self-harm and depression. Yet, here we were, dripping with joy, taken aback by the extraordinary photos and joking together about our finger-sized cucumber sandwiches compared to curried goat and hulled millet. The curried goat won hands down.

Getting back on track, I asked Charlie about those evening classes because, to me, it seemed somehow incongruous and a stretch to consider teaching children how to wake up to a wonderful life in such difficult circumstances.

Charlie’s deep frown highlighted my lack of understanding and ignorance. Herald readers, I’ve much to learn.

“Oh, many are living in hardship; that’s true. But there’s no correlation between a wonderful life and the abundance or lack of wealth. It was an embarrassing revelation for me to realise the children there are happier, more contented, graceful and grateful than most in this country.”

I felt blushing in my cheeks—a good time to order more tea and apologise for my naive faux pas.

“We’re pointing the kids *to the essence of life*, their innate potential and an *understanding* of how life experience works rather than a concept or prescription of what they should do and who they should be. And they may create wealth in the world from that place, and they might not. But whichever path they take, they’ll be far happier knowing their well-being and mental health *are independent* of either path. So yes, a wonderful life can be their experience though that’s not to say there aren’t hardships, anxieties, and terrible conditions for some—as there are too in the ‘richest countries’ and for the ‘wealthiest’ of people.”

“Could you give the readers an example of those evening classes?”

“We encourage the kids to go *way upstream*, to step back from conjecture and specific detail towards a broader, more philosophical and truthful conversation, exploring their curiosity about life and appreciating who they are *before* psychology—and hopefully, to become less restricted by their innocent and self-imposed insecurities, judgments, fears and prejudices.”

“Wow, that’s fascinating stuff, Charlie. But I’m rummaging through my marbles and struggling to fully comprehend how you’d engage younger children in such concepts. It certainly deviates from the typical school curriculum, doesn’t it?”

“True, but frankly, it’s effortless because who’s not curious about peace of mind, love, freedom, laughter, kindness, intuition, inspiration, creativity and resilience? It’s a no-brainer, Den. The kids uncover a path to their true nature, not by adding practises into their lives but by awakening to what’s already there within—and *they feel it deeply*. And it’s exciting.”

“Awesome. Can you say more—I know our readers would be intrigued?”

“Sure, though delving into these ideas might seem rather abstract given the limitations of a short interview. Nevertheless, we’re committed to creating space for kids to realise the inside-out nature of experience, knowing that moment-to-moment thinking—*thought* and not circumstance, is the creator of experience. And then the kids lighten up to relish life, waking up *out of* their thinking into the present moment—less bound to the insidious belief that life unfolds outside in. It’s not repackaging, reframing or suggesting how they should think. Instead, we’re looking to the true nature of thought and what comes before—to the original ingredients that give rise to this wonderful life. And looking in that direction *is transformational*.”

“So, the scope here is vast, Den. We’re empowering the kids and their parents, too, if they join the class, to embrace the unknown rather than being confined by the already known.”

I had to interrupt.

“Hold your horses, Charlie, you’re throwing so much at me. You said you want them to embrace the unknown and understand that thought creates experience *from the inside out*. Can you expand because that’s... unusual?”

“Well, the first thing that occurs to me, and it’s kind of obvious, is *we already know what we know*, so why look there? If we only look to what we already

know, we come to a standstill—we're blinkered. The unknown has to be a more expansive direction. And maybe this isn't for now, Den, but you'd be surprised how solutions come to us from out of the unknown, from out of the blue, that's the design—it's just that it mostly doesn't look that way."

Readers, I had nothing other than throw myself back into the cushions to let out a deep sigh... of relief, I think. As I type, I'm still unable to explain why I felt that way.

"And concerning what I call 'inside-out' and saying that thought creates experience, Den, let's continue our chat and see if that phrase makes more sense after a few examples. But before we move on, there's one last important piece. We also want the kids to be curious about how best they can unleash their innate creative potential to thrive and create stuff in the world from this new foundation. And that's important because, at first, many think this understanding encourages us to become listless, passive, lethargic... and it's the opposite. The possibilities become limitless once we understand that clarity of mind is available, regardless of circumstances.

"And yet we can't teach such life lessons by rote as with the alphabet, so we play games or have reflective group dialogues hoping the kids recognise these truths through insight and deeper understanding rather than some surface-level intellectual notion."

"Wow, Charlie, that sounds like something I'd have loved at school."

"Me too, but that's another story, I guess. But anyway, as an example, we ask the kids to bring school an item of sentimental value. We sit them in a circle and ask each to describe why their item is unique and special. It's a fun exercise; without fail, they love to join in and share their thoughts and stories. After everyone's had their turn, they swap their item with another child, holding onto something then that might seem insignificant or trivial even though they know it has special meaning to the other. And once again, they talk about the item they're now holding. And they struggle to go beyond a rudimentary description because they're not attached to it. Once everyone's had a turn, we have a group discussion highlighting what occurred during the game."

"What do they usually conclude?"

"That their thoughts and feelings about possessions are personal and *entirely made-up*. That's a life lesson in itself and a *sound starting point*. You see, initially, they assume their toy, book, memento or whatever they brought to class *caused* or *created* their feelings of joy, warmth, or even sadness. Yet they

soon discover the same item does not elicit the same thoughts and feelings within others. It's about helping the kids realise that objects can't possibly create thoughts and feelings. Later, they realise that *no experience or circumstance* possesses the power to create feelings within us. But as we grow up, we take this inaccurate illusion of cause and effect for granted, believing that objects and circumstances create our inner experiences and that our happiness and sadness come from 'out there,' even though that can never be true. As I said, *thought creates all experience inside out*—it's never the other way around. And then, through more games, the kids uncover new and exciting implications that changes their lives and relationships."

"That sounds fascinating. I'd love to be there to watch them play."

"Exactly. A few weeks back, one of the younger kids knocked me for six. She was about eight years old and had difficulty sleeping in the dark. After reflection she said, 'I used to think my doll helped me sleep at night. It doesn't. It's my thinking about my doll. And if I'm thinking nice things about my doll, I'll feel nice feelings and go to sleep. But it's not the doll. And when I wake at night and am scared of the dark, it's not the dark. It can't be the dark. It's my thinking about the dark.'"

"Oh my, Charlie, I can feel that."

"Yes, me too. That insightful recognition that her feelings of comfort for the doll and fear of the dark are somehow connected came from her—no intervention. We're not teaching self-help techniques and strategies but something far more profound so that they can intuit life for themselves.

"We recently helped a new intake of kids learn that when they're feeling down, those low-mood feelings are not the enemy but our friends. *They're an invitation for us to appreciate that our thinking is off-kilter*, and that's all. Again, through games and playful dialogue, they understand their feelings are only ever aware of thought *in that moment* and have no awareness or appreciation of the outside world. There is no umbilical cord feeding us emotions from the outside world. The thought-feeling connection is a one-way street and appreciating that one point is life-changing.

"In a way, Den, our feelings indicate our moment-to-moment level of clarity. And there are infinite levels. A phrase that resonates with me is 'pure consciousness.' So, *objectively*, not subjectively, our feeling state informs us of how attuned we are with pure consciousness or, you could say, the degree to which we're subsumed within contaminated and insecure thought."

Charlie's assured expression, shrouded in gentle vulnerability, drew me deeper into the conversation.

"One young lad recounted arriving home from school one evening to find his Mum deeply upset after an earlier altercation with a neighbour. Typically, he would have joined in the upset, engaging in cussing, cursing, and thoughts of revenge. But on this occasion, he chose a different path.

"He said he sat quietly with her, offering comfort until her fired-up emotions settled. Later, he gently introduced her to the concept of the thought-feeling connection he'd learned in class. He suggested that her upset feelings originated from within herself, reflecting her thoughts in that moment rather than caused by the earlier quarrel. Remarkable for a 13-year-old. He shared that he explained to her that even a tiny realisation of this thought-feeling connection could lead her to become more reflective and less likely to react out of bitterness and hatred. Consider the profound implications of this understanding for that young boy's life—and his Mum's.

"Clear examples, Den, of insights and understanding in action. Of new thought or self-realisation from within, creating lasting change—minus the typical practise of strategies and coping mechanisms. So, realising Truth changes behaviour—not changing behaviour for the sake of it."

"So, it's a life-long path towards self-realisation?"

"Not exactly. Paths are typically about arriving someplace or achieving something, whereas here, there's no starting or end point; we end where we began—no journey required. We are already what we're searching for, but that truth has become blind to us. So, rather than a life-long path to self-realisation, the phrase I prefer is *infinite shifts in consciousness* where we bathe in a forever deepening presence of Mind. Once we realise there's a deeper knowing available to us with a much less restricted signal, we're free and able to experience life's potential at any moment, in the raw—no path."

Charlie was putting on a show. I mean a real show in the local theatre, a charity event called 'Hope, A Tale of Transformation,' to celebrate the city's Mental Health Awareness Week, and I was keen to talk about that too.

"So why put on a show? It's a massive undertaking?"

"It is. But the message is far bigger than the show, and that's what drives me—bringing a story of hope to people who wouldn't ordinarily have that word in their repertoire. It's this Sunday, nine until six."

“A long show?”

“It is—but I’ve taught dozens of workshops, and this is no different, other than it’s set in a theatre. Essentially, it’s a snapshot of my life from when I was rock bottom to breaking free. Before that, life was a constant battle— anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation, OCD, the works. I was a treasure chest of failed attempts. Honestly, I was convinced I was broken and unfixable! And who’d want to love that?”

“Heavens, Charlie, that must have been dreadful.”

“Yep, sure was. Let’s say I was ready to end it all, and then while out one day, I bumped into this guy and my life”

Charlie’s presence quieted to stilled silence, a vulnerable expression hiding behind the teacup.

“... changed forever.”

I glanced over to the looming grandfather clock so as not to stare.

“I’m sorry, it gets me every time.”

The magnitude of the change in Charlie’s life became apparent at that moment. The photographs and the kids’ beaming faces made perfect sense.

Having interviewed many of the country’s prominent personalities, I’ve realised that a genuine connection is rare. Usually, after an interview, I feel nothing but a hollow emptiness. But interviewing those with a tale of truth to tell and speaking from their heart, there’s an instantaneous connection, and it’s visceral, beautiful and heart-warming.

The tea, scones and jam were daintily spread before us. Curiously, Charlie wanted to discuss the merits of the decorative teapot, which threw me a little. Still, I was far more intrigued by Charlie’s triumph over adversity and asked about those challenging times.

“Den, I struggled for years—and like Humpty Dumpty, I desperately squeezed the last drops of superglue and failed miserably to put myself back together again. Those around me were consumed with analysing and dissecting the shattered fragments of my being and delving into my past. But *none of them* guided me towards truth, each seeking to mould me

according to their latest theory. Innocently, you could say, they all thought they could fix me.

“And then I came upon this stranger who thrust a stake in the ground, a signpost encouraging me to look in a whole new direction. It blew my world apart. Within a few weeks, everything made perfect sense. So much so that it was comical, almost.”

Charlie moved closer and gently reached across to tap me on the knee.

Dear Evening Herald readers,

I wish you were here. I'm having a lovely time, and it's been a fantastic interview so far. The weather's great, the locals are lovely, the hotel is impressive, and the food sublime. I'm with Charlie enjoying a clotted-cream tea, and I'm about to hear something that will probably resonate with me through the years. I suspect it'll take a while to impact me, but I think I'm about to make a snow angel.

Den.

“Let me tell you something, Den.”

I shuffled forward, all ears. Waiting for what, I wasn't sure.

“It was entirely innocent, but to my core, I believed I was useless and damaged goods. Then, after being guided towards a potential within me far more profound than I ever considered possible, I was shocked to discover, despite evidence to satisfy any jury to the contrary, that I had perfect mental health and well-being. But sadly, we all spend our time scurrying through endless rabbit holes of self-improvement, constantly working to fix ourselves and blind to what's innate—our mental health and well-being.”

Charlie leant in again, even closer. A little embarrassed by our sudden bout of intimacy, I made a subtle, almost imperceptible movement backwards.

“Even you, Den, all that insecure and anxious thinking you've heaped upon yourself throughout life, none of it is true—it *can't be*. All thought, whether positive, negative, neutral or anything in-between—it's all OK and has no more power over us than the fingers of that grandfather clock have over time itself. Den, honestly, you're far more than you think you are.”

It felt like the soft crunch of snow. Feigning deafness, I stared through Charlie at the huge cascading lily arrangement behind. But I'd heard. Far too embarrassed to admit low-grade anxiety played any part in my life, I

chose not to share my snow-angel moment. In truth, I've forever been just three heartbeats away from the next negative thought. Readers, I've outed myself.

"Years ago," Charlie continued, "I'd have given anything to end it all and idolised the thought of a quick way out. But today, oh my God, I want to taste every morsel, the sweet and the sour. There's a phrase I love—'I've become grateful for life's highs and graceful in its lows.' And that's what I want for Sunday's audience, and I wish that for humanity too."

I felt humbled and inspired in equal measure and, reaching again for my phone, asked for a quick Tweetable soundbite.

"Den, try explaining a reflection to someone who's never seen a mirror. They'll get an intellectual understanding, a concept, but that's all. Only when they eventually look into a mirror to see for themselves will they truly grasp the truth of a mirror. So, a quick soundbite wouldn't help here."

"I notice you use the words mental health and not mental illness?"

"Yes. Because that's the truth, we're all mentally healthy but don't know it. We think ourselves out of our mental health, but it's never mental illness. Mental health is where we end up when we're not preoccupied. Imagine how the ground you work from shifts when you see that to be true. Life isn't happening 'to us' from the outside-in because our lived reality is an inside-out job. More often than not, though, life appears the other way around, outside-in, and that mistaken belief is the basis of most of our problems.

"I can give you an example right now, Den. On the way to the theatre this morning, I visited a local shop to pick up a few nibbles and thought, 'Wow, I'm so lucky to have this on the doorstep; what a lovely shop.' The staff were friendly, and the shop was sparkling with tons of choice. And the fruit looked amazing the way they had it laid out."

"And what happened?"

"Nothing, well, not this morning anyhow. But yesterday, I'd had an awful morning before popping into the same shop. I was grumpy as hell. And the staff were rude, the shelves were empty, the fruit display was all over the place, and it all felt grubby. I thought I'd never go back there again."

"You mean this morning the cleaners had done a thorough job?"

“Not at all, and that’s my point. In hindsight, I know that everything was the same yesterday as today. The only difference was my state of mind. And because we live life through our thinking, that’s what life or my *‘personal reality’* presented to me. Yesterday a grubby shop, today a delightful shop. Same shop, a different state of mind. Does that make sense?”

“It does. I guess that’s why, and I’m embarrassed to admit this, some days my wife seems more irritating after I’ve had a long day.”

“Exactly! Yesterday’s annoying partner is today’s loving partner—it’s *the same* partner. Yesterday’s hustle and bustle of the high street seemed bothersome, and today it’s refreshing. Same street, different thinking.”

“Charlie, are you saying life is up to me?”

“Yes...and no. The goal is not to add practises to trick ourselves into a more wonderful life but to fall back into, or uncover, *who we already are before* our psychology. This is not a searching ‘for,’ but a relaxing ‘into.’ And if you can at least open yourself to this truth as a possibility, a direction where you can remain curious, you’re on the road to freedom.”

“I like that. So, I guess I have to change my thoughts to something more relaxing, so I’m in a better state of mind, then?”

“No, I’d never suggest you try to change your thinking because once you’ve thought something, you’ve already thought it. I guess you could say that thought-horse has already bolted. Understanding and awareness are key. We must understand how the system works, becoming more aware of what’s creating the system—that thought creates experience! We’re far more effective when we understand how something works, just like driving a car. And that includes life, too. Everything becomes simple, more obvious. It’s common sense, you could say.”

“That makes sense. Understanding and awareness are the keys.”

“Exactly. It’s like... I recently read that when a plane is on approach to landing and seems too slow to remain airborne, the air beneath its wings is still flowing as fast as a category-five hurricane—it’s not going to fall from the sky. We don’t freak out when we see a plane approaching the runway too slowly because our understanding brings certainty—despite appearances. And similarly, the deeper understanding I’m pointing to here is the uplift that guides us through life. It directs us away from distortion, insecurity, confusion and complexity towards deeper clarity, certainty, simplicity and wisdom.”

“That’s a great way of explaining it. But how can we wrap up, Charlie? I know you’ve only got an hour, so I guess our time’s almost up.”

“Den, we can spend years trying to change our thinking, messing around with what people call ‘limiting beliefs,’ and such-like, but that doesn’t work on an ongoing basis. Or we could go to therapy to talk about our past and childhood—it might seem to work, though not for the reason we think. So, let’s imagine a client who’s been anxious for years.

“They’ve spent years struggling to overcome—searching for the causes of their problems. They’ve added dozens of coping strategies and mind-management techniques and fought hard to change behaviours or alter the circumstances they *believed to be the cause* of their stress. But those approaches rarely work, and when they do, I can guarantee the client has insightfully, and probably by chance, realised a deeper understanding, and that’s why they changed. So, to thrive and live a well-lived life, we have to look before our beliefs and behaviours. We must realise something from within—a new thought, an insight. People change by going upstream of their anxious thinking and behaviours—that’s where solutions are created. And from there, we come home to our true nature. Jerry, my coach, described this coming home to our true nature as being like the wonderful kindness of a stranger. Except this is no stranger. It’s who we are—our true nature uncontaminated by personal thought.”

I had to take a moment, fighting back the emotions racing through my veins, having been captivated by a presence rarely witnessed.

“My goodness, Charlie. When you mentioned the kindness of a stranger, I somehow knew what you meant—my whole body felt fuzzy.”

“That’s your wisdom. You’ve heard something fresh. And remember, *we all* have the capacity to see truth—a truth with a capital T. Thank you.”

And that’s where we brought the interview to a close. I left the hotel through the enormous revolving doors and bid farewell to the concierge with the friendliest nod, the warmest smile, and a kick in my step that took us both by surprise. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but something within me felt deeply touched, as though I’d been in the presence of something unique, exhilarating, enticing and exciting. I had to buy myself a ticket—and maybe an extra seat for my newfound snow angel, too.

Charlie will appear in “Hope – A Tale of Transformation” next Sunday, 17th November, at the MainLine Apollo. All proceeds go to charity.

Hope: A Tale of Transformation



Welcome to the Show

I hide behind the wings, waiting patiently for the floor manager's signal.

As requested, the monotonous din of a dripping tap echoes loudly over the sound system, drowning out the audience's chitter-chatter. Adrenaline courses through my veins as I gaze out at the barren stage that I, singularly, am supposed to fill.

For the opening scene, I requested just three stage props: a chair, the incessant sound of a loud dripping tap and, plonked centre stage, a single wilted rose.

Roses are meant to symbolise celebration, an offering of love or appreciation. But a regime of cruel and intentional neglect has brought this specimen to its knees, and now, it's an embarrassment bathed in the spotlight. There's no celebration here, at least, not yet.

Finally, the floor manager catches my eye. I return a faint nod as I tiptoe onto the darkened stage to the sound of a gentle-but-reticent burst of applause.

My nerves settle as I perch myself firmly upon the solitary highchair. I take a quick sip of water while the dripping tap quietens, and the applause fades to a long, expectant silence. A second spotlight catches me through a haze of inappropriate, wispy stage fog.

I slowly raise the mic. Whether it was on, I hadn't considered. I clear my throat, glancing over to the desperate foliage to my side, and finally, the show begins.

"Good morning. And thank you all for coming to spend the day with me." I say, gently nodding to reassure the audience and myself—unsure whether anyone could hear me.

I peer through the mist towards the packed auditorium. Nodding heads confirm they'd heard.

I see you sitting upright, perfectly still and attentive among a sea of expressionless faces. Our eyes dance together as if momentarily bound only to part as swiftly as they met.

We have never met, not even for an instant, *but I know you.*

I nod surreptitiously, but only to you.

“My name’s Charlie, and to begin the show, I’d like to take you back through time.”

I climb down from the chair, taking a few steps forward and gesturing with a wave of my arm; I bring attention to the imaginary apartment before me.

“I’m at home, in a studio apartment that’s not dressed to impress. There’s furniture of sorts: a small portable TV with a coat-hanger aerial, a hand-me-down contraption that calls itself a record player, a foam-filled sofa and a kitchenette taken straight from the cheapest room in Alfred Hitchcock’s Bates Motel. It’s silent, except for the constant sound of the kitchen’s dripping tap, the footsteps of everyday life beyond the single tiny window and the drone of nearby traffic.”

I take another slow sip of water.

“I’m scared, alone and desperately lonely. Since childhood, I’ve endured agonising bouts of depression and anxiety, and I’m lost. I feel hopeless, helpless, and way beyond caring. The ever-mocking church bells have again rung in their hourly reminder of the slow passing of time. It’s now past midday, and I’m uncomfortably curled up in bed. I drew the curtains at daybreak, and now, with eyes wide open, my mind is frantically racing. Unfortunately, it’s a recurring pattern; I’m often curled up in bed at this time. But why would I get up? Why should I get up? Life has become unbearable, and trapped within these four walls; I’ve had enough.”

Dazzled by the spotlight, I walk precariously to the invisible edge of the stage. The silence of the auditorium heightens the echo of each precise footstep.

I see you. *I know you, and* I hold you in my stare.

I whisper into the mic.

“Life has been like this since my early teens. It all began with what they called mild anxiety. I was constantly bewildered, vulnerable and confused—a sorrowful state for someone so young. No matter how hard I tried, I felt no connection to others, especially my ‘schoolmates.’ Above all, I felt incredibly insecure. Lacking confidence and self-esteem, I envied others who appeared happy, contented and settled. I couldn’t understand why

constant dread and negativity drowned my every waking moment. Mild anxiety escalated into a deep depression, and my world grew smaller. By the age of 14, I' had withdrawn further into myself, locking myself in my bedroom and, even worse, locking myself away inside the dark depths of my mind. I self-harmed. Nothing too serious, just inconspicuously placed knife scratches to the rear of my shoulders. My parents and others from the helping professions tried to reach out to me, but they never understood me. And I couldn't understand them either. I loathed my life, hating every next breath."

I lower the mic. I look out to meet eyes with you and then beyond into the barely visible faces of the hushed audience.

I stand motionless. And I wait.

Tension fills the air. A polite, muted cough escapes to my left, a few uncomfortable seat shufflers can be heard, and a secretive yawn slips through to my right.

I can still see you.

We are connected.

I know you.

Reaching back to grab the chair, I carefully place it front and centre stage. I sit, head bowed, patiently waiting for my breathing and thoughts to settle.

Looking out to the auditorium, our eyes secretly embrace once again.

And then, with the desperate opening line, 'I'm scrunched up in bed,' I recount my story of hope—a *tale of transformation*.

Black Treacle Screaming

I'm scrunched up in bed.

I can't move. I could. But I don't want to.

Can you fathom what it's like inside my head? I thought not. Well, allow me to acquaint you. There's only one colour, a singular black. And not just any old black but a jet-black so intense that any other black appears grey in comparison. And if anyone dared to peek inside, they would find something resembling black treacle screaming. I know it doesn't make sense in English because treacle doesn't scream. But then again, heads don't explode either.

I've prayed for a fresh palette for years, hoping vibrant colours would drip enthusiastically from life's paintbrush. But those hopes never bore fruit—they were hopeless.

So today dawns like every other day, while the clammy tentacles of time wreak havoc in my mind, staining every moment. Monotonous and melancholic thoughts lay themselves before me, yearning for my attention. I scavenge among them, longing for something new, something lighter. But all I encounter is dread, the dread of another monotonous and colourless day.

The room is engulfed in a deafening silence—it's the silence of loneliness, and it's very familiar to me.

I toss and turn as the bed sheets play their mind games once again. They taunt and mock with unfulfilled promises of comfort. They lie, just like life, pretending to offer something rarely delivered.

On the floor by the bedside, yet another empty bottle winks knowingly at me. I can't recall its contents, though forty-seven per cent sounds about right. It may seem tragic, but I have a name for "the drink," and that's Twiggy.

But unlike the bed sheets, Twiggy never lies. Twiggy, my faithful companion, always brings solace.

Have you ever marvelled at how others look so happy and contented? It's not rhetorical. I'd genuinely love to know, and I wonder all the time. When I gaze out of the window, I see animated and joyful faces gliding by. They

seem free. Just yesterday, a young man caught me staring straight at him through the rain-splattered window. He offered up a smile from beneath his dripping umbrella. He had a warm, engaging facial expression as though he'd just heard some thrilling news. I stared straight through him, pretending not to notice. I was devoid of expression, empty.

The rain was relentless; the rain is always relentless.

The trouble with depression and anxiety is they pride themselves in tainting everything. It's as though some mysterious alien presence has stolen away inside my mind to devour all hope and desire, and all that remains are bleak, monotonous thoughts about the shitty embers of my life. There are tedious thoughts about today, tomorrow and yesterday, about the apartment, time, death, the trembling of my arms and legs, pills, the swelling in my throat – a side effect of the drugs, the unpaid bills, noise, the neighbours, sunlight, cleaning the house, cleaning myself, the pain of standing, slouching, money, my body, my face, eating, my past, my future, my health, loneliness, my mind, my Mum, this moment, the bedsheets, my racing heart, the dripping tap, my failures, my Dad.

Various doctors have planted dozens of labels across my forehead throughout my troubled years, from severe anxiety and depression to borderline personality disorder, attention deficit, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. The latter, OCD, has been plaguing me more than usual. It plays out in various forms, such as switching light switches multiple times or folding and unfolding clothing repeatedly.

A comparison might help here. Have you ever suffered an intense thirst on a baking hot day only to taunt yourself with a bottle of ice-cold water? You slowly unscrew the lid to drag out the promise of relief and, in slow-motion, throw your head backwards to allow the heavens to gush to the back of your throat, where an enormous sense of relief crashes through your body. That's how it is with my OCD. A rush of adrenalin-fuelled expectation shaking me to the core, pouring comfort over repetitive, monotonous and monotone thoughts. The effect is wonderfully sublime, and the ritual's repetition brings a bizarre mixture of relief and anxiety. It's a strange cocktail, but it's one I'm apt to drink daily.

'Have you been entertaining suicidal thoughts again, Charlie?' The doctor asked in a rather dull and uninterested tone. She was staring at her monitor, purposely tilted so I couldn't peek without cracking my neck. I cracked my neck.

Again, my life's struggles are presented to her on a plate, and the entire story has to be consumed and digested in the time it takes to eat a petit four.

I blame myself, not her. I may be 'clinically depressed,' her words, not mine, but I still know what's true. And what is that truth? I'll tell you, even though it's shallow and pathetic. I'm like a piece of rotten fruit. And what do we do with rotten fruit? We bin it. And that's where I belong.

I have had suicidal thoughts. I'd go so far as to say those suicidal thoughts and Twiggy have become my best friends. There's comfort in those dark thoughts, knowing that life is fragile, and I'm only allowed to breathe in another day should I choose.

I didn't own up to suicidal thoughts. I seldom do. Some things are best kept between myself, Twiggy and the bedsheets. Still, the doctor prescribes a pill that 'ought to lift the dark clouds within a week or two.'

They often say that, but the clouds rarely lift.

But the clouds did lift a little this time, though what lay beneath was something akin to roadkill, somewhat lifeless, limp, and curiously untidy.

There's drink in the cupboard.

There's always drink in the cupboard.

Help Me

I remember watching a news program about a war-torn country in the middle east, possibly Syria. Children were huddled together on the dusty, battle-weary streets, their faces dripping in blood, their hair matted, and their clothes covered in dust and filth. I remember frowning as I scrutinised their plight. I edged closer to the TV. Their desperate eyes stared back at me, pleading. I reached out to touch them, but they looked right through me. And then I realised I am war-torn. I am like them. How would a reporter describe my life?

But of course, I've been drinking again. It's Twiggy's second little outing today. Throughout the day, numerous heavy trucks have sped by tantalisingly close to my house, their roaring engines sending a thrill through my body.

This feeling can't be right. Surely this can't be all there is?

I slowly unscrew the toothpaste cap, gazing at my sad and pitiful reflection in the steamed-up mirror. I squeeze the toothpaste out, but the sweet taste doesn't pair well with my dark and sour mood. The slow, repetitive motion of brushing my teeth reverberates in my head, accompanied by tinnitus ringing in my ears. I lean heavily on the filthy sink, burdened by the weight of my unattractive belly and hips. I attempt to gargle, and then, feeling a groan building-up deep within my throat, I spit. I spit and moan in unison. Can you help me? The towel smells musty. Please, help me! The radiator feels cold. Please, help me! My head feels heavy. Help me! The tap keeps dripping. Please, help!

The trucks outside continue to rattle by, their thunderous engines echoing through the room. Are they getting closer? The phone joins in the commotion, adding to the cacophony with its relentless ringing at precisely 2 p.m. It must be Mum calling, as she always does.

There's a tablet I'm supposed to take when things get this unbearable.

The usual dark thoughts flash before my eyes, and malevolent voices repeat their chants, mocking me. I seldom pay them any mind, but today they seem more compelling for some reason. Apparently, I'm useless.

The phone screeches again. It's Mum once more. It always is. There's more drink in the cupboard. There's always more drink in the cupboard.

Chance Encounter

I don't remember much because it's all hazy. I found myself curled up on the bathroom floor, having taken the magic tablet. I must have remained there for an hour or more, shivering, feeling cold, and my head pounding as if trapped in a crushing vice.

I'd managed to crawl onto the sofa just before Mum arrived. It was the usual rushed and frantic visit filled with the same uninteresting outbursts as every other visit. 'You're giving me a headache—again!' 'You look awful!' 'Have you taken your tablets today?' 'Why didn't you answer the phone—I did phone twice!' 'Did you make your bed?' 'Would you like a cup of tea?' 'Why haven't you flushed the toilet?' 'Did you wash your hands?' 'Is today bin day?'

She quickly emptied the bin in her customary 'the world will end tomorrow' fashion and unpacked—or rather dumped the conveyor belt of bland groceries onto the cluttered tabletop. My preferences don't vary much; a crusty bread roll, a small carton of milk, a can of beans and a microwave meal, usually a microwave carbonara, pasta or fish pie. Occasionally she'll make a small effort and show up all smiles with a 'luxury' chilli con Carne for two. Typically, though, she doesn't hang around for lunch, and so today, it'll be carbonara for one.

"You look awful!" She'd growled with an extra-strong emphasis on the awful.

I never look well, so it's a moot point. I invariably reply with an abrupt grunt. If I can't manage that, I'll often raise an eyebrow and continue.

I don't recall which profanity I'd chosen to hurl at her, but I vaguely recollect her crashing through the door, shrieking a profane curse that I couldn't quite comprehend. Despite her dramatic exit and the vile obscenities I hurl at her, she always returns the following day as though our previous encounter had concluded with hugs and kisses. And never a word is mentioned, each day a new day.

It was fortunate she'd left early—I'd formulated a plan.

All I could write was, "Thank you, Mum." It looked somewhat incongruous, sticking out of her favourite tea mug.

Frantically, I wrestled with the tap one last time, hoping to silence its monotonous dripping. My life hung in the balance—my last shot at finding peace. Unfortunately for me, it dripped.

I hurried into my overcoat, an absurdity given my destination and headed toward the end game.

“Good afternoon, Charlie. Off somewhere nice?” Mr Turnbull, the elderly gentleman from four doors down, shouted from behind his meticulously manicured hedgerow, waving his wet and no doubt top-of-the-range carwash sponge. Was he waving goodbye? It felt absurd, as though an obscure black comedy was slowly unfolding. I didn’t respond. I never do.

I knew the next steps would be the most significant and possibly the last I would ever take. I hesitated, yearning to savour this moment, to taste the last breath, to smell the goodbye breezes, and witness life’s last fragment of light before scrunching my eyes closed to take the final few steps.

The road fell into silence, except for the faint breeze rustling through the trees and my heart pounding. I felt dazed, bewildered and incredibly vulnerable. My mind spun rapidly, unsure of what was unfolding and what I was planning.

My legs felt like jelly as I collapsed to the floor sobbing, fearful and wrapped in the darkest of dark, the most malevolent bed sheet of desperation.

I huddled into a protective ball, my head in my hands, my heart in my throat, and my mind suffocating in the bleakness.

And I remained there, crouched on the pavement, utterly alone, for what seemed an eternity.

And that’s when I had my chance encounter.

There is hope

“Hey, are you OK there?”

The concerned voice came at me from behind. I turned somewhat agitated. Startled, I opened my eyes. I breathe, I smell, I see.

He was crouched beside me, a little too close for comfort, I thought. How he’d crept up on me, I wasn’t sure.

“Can I help you up?”

“That’s my house. I’m OK if you leave me here. I’m fine, honestly. Just a tough day at the office.”

He had one of those warm voices, deeper than most, which somehow complemented his kind facial expression.

“Is there someone in the house who can look after you?” He asked, his concern evident. I remained silent, contemplating whether ignoring him would make him leave. But he persisted.

“Look, I can’t leave you like this,” genuine concern in his voice again.

“Let me call someone? Or I can sit with you for a while if you wish?”

Before I’d replied, he’d sunk further to slump beside me, the warmth of his body bringing a strange comfort. Seconds turned into minutes, and minutes, seemingly, into infinity.

How did I end up in such a ridiculous predicament? Embarrassed and ashamed, I opened my mouth, about to ask him to leave. But he beat me to it, casually talking about life and how he loved to watch people and animals go about their lives. He spoke of the wild-looking hedgerow opposite and all the little creatures that called it home and how, when he was younger, he helped his Dad on the family farm.

“But what I loved most was the wildlife,” he said. “The cows and sheep were fun, but secretly admiring the corn bunting from afar and listening to the skylark was heavenly. I’d sit for hours contemplating how it seemed interwoven, like the most elaborate tapestry. *It all just seems perfect without intervention.*”

I continued to gaze straight ahead. It all felt a little too surreal for words.

“Feeling more relaxed?” he said, gently elbowing me. “Would you like a short walk? Maybe a warm cuppa? Or we could stay here if you prefer?”

As we walked, he continued to talk very quietly and casually. And I listened, transfixed by his gentle demeanour and lightness of being. It all seemed bizarre, comedic even. One moment I’m about to kiss life’s drudgery goodbye, and the next, I’m marched to a nearby café by a total stranger who, I fancy, thinks himself a knight in shining armour. And yet it felt right, somehow.

I’d never been to this café. I guess it’s one of those new-fangled modern cafés, entirely minimalist with hard straight lines and everything stripped back to bare concrete. Thankfully the harsh lines are softened by shafts of cathedral-style light beams cascading through the vast picture windows. Despite the coffee machine’s constant grinding din, it’s also desperately quiet.

We ordered tea.

I’d calmed but still felt war-torn in a foreign land. By now, I’d gathered his name was Jerry. He’s 54 and was on route to teach a workshop at the nearby community centre. He’d spotted, he said, what initially looked like a huge bundle of clothes cast by the roadside.

“A life coach,” he replied, almost apologetically, after I surprised myself by enquiring about his job.

Walking to the café, as best as I could, I tried to explain I’d had enough of life and could no longer see the point of each day. But rather than focusing on my bleak story, he explained how he’d resolved to take a detour to enjoy the fresh air and savour the wildlife in the neighbouring fields. And as we walked, he pointed to the trees, the birds and the patterns of the freshly ploughed fields. And he laughed and smiled and spoke with a joy for life that I found unusual and oddly mesmerising.

On the one hand, I wanted to scream at him, ‘Don’t you realise what I was about to do?’ But on the other hand, it was beautiful to listen to someone conversing so gently, so innocently. And I noticed something unusually welcoming, yet odd—I felt weirdly settled. I felt calm, clear and at odds with how I’d felt for the previous few days. Isn’t that bizarre?

What's more, I already felt connected to Jerry in a way that confounded me. He's a stranger, yet I felt this deep bond and appreciation of his presence far beyond what I was accustomed to. How is that possible?

Tea arrived, comprising two trendy-looking china teacups, one slate-green china teapot with an accompanying chipped spout and an oddly matched pewter milk jug.

Somewhat comically, we took our first tea sips in silence. The stillness between us was broken only by the slurping of blisteringly hot tea and the chinking of china cup against saucer. It seemed like a game of 'who's going to go first.' Ultimately, Jerry leant in, and with the faintest of whispers ...

"Do I have your permission to ask something you might think weird?"

I swallowed my tea with a much louder gulp than I'd hoped.

"Of course," I squeaked, peering sheepishly over the top of my cup.

"Despite what you've been through, can you at least sense a smidgen of hope? Or do you think I've lost my marbles in asking?"

My cup froze mid-air, halfway to the waiting saucer.

Running his hands through his hair, he leaned back into the chair as if he were in a holiday hammock, and then, as if to shield our conversation from nearby prying ears, he leant in again as though about to whisper something discreetly. But I had other ideas.

"Sorry," I snapped, choking on my words somewhat, "honestly, I've no idea what hope even looks like. So no, not even a smidgen."

"I know, Charlie. I've been there too, and I appreciate how relentless that sense of hopelessness can be. But if you're curious enough to look with me over tea and cake, maybe you'll hear something. Perhaps only a hint of hope initially, but that's all it takes to know there's more on offer. And, Charlie, that glimmer of hope is not out here. It's not in the ether or the tea."

He was highly animated, pointing around the room as if on a guided tour.

"And it's not within me or even my words—it's within you. It's always been there. It never goes away, but you don't yet know it. And, Charlie, I don't mean hope for a specific outcome but hope as life's foundation, our bedrock, a forever-present possibility."

He surprised me, reached across the table, and ‘air-poked’ me just by the midriff.

“Hope is in here,” he said firmly but softly. “Not inside your body, though, but before the thought of you. It’s a space before the you-of-you and not a destination you have to work towards because there is no there... there—it’s in your very essence.”

Though I felt it, I was baffled and hadn’t a clue what he meant. My mind didn’t know where to go next. I remained speechless. But ‘the me before me?’ ‘There is no there... there?’ Is this guy a nutter?

I shifted from agitated to calm, to even more agitated, and then even calmer. And throughout, Jerry remained still, quietly watching, peering about the café, drinking his tea, and looking very concerned, yet somehow free and unconcerned. It seemed as though the world had come to a grinding halt, and I’d fallen into a floaty spaciousness I never knew existed. I scrunched my eyes tight, my head collapsed backwards, and I exhaled more air than could possibly have been hiding in my lungs. Jerry fidgeted in his seat and let out a throaty ‘excuse me’ cough.

“There you go,” he said, in a voice that could calm the ocean waves, “That stillness and gorgeous space you’ve just fallen into, that’s your true nature, your essence—who you are *before* thought. We are not *who* or *what* we think, Charlie. Yet the thinking we do that shrinks our world—it’s entirely innocent. We’re so much more vast than that. If we look towards the truth and beauty of the space before thought, the more we find ourselves bathing in the infinite potential that waits in the wings. And beyond that, it’s a magic carpet ride—though I know that’s not how it looks to you right now.”

I gazed past Jerry through the window beyond, my attention distracted by the distant street noises mingling with the soft hum of the café. A brief moment of crazy thinking crashed through my mind, a whirlwind of doubts and questions—my fingers tapping a nervous rhythm on the tabletop. But, oddly, the distraction was momentary. What could I say? Could I argue his point? Is there infinite potential? Am I more than my thinking? I remained silent, though, curiously, I nodded—slowly. I’ve no idea why I nodded and was more shocked to see I was nodding with the whole of my being—as though it wanted to announce on my behalf, ‘OK, I hear you.’ Jerry leant forward, casting a cursory glance about the café before continuing.

“Isn’t it remarkable that one-moment life seems overwhelming, then within a blink, this sense of peace and wonder can wash over you? That quiet

you're feeling is always there within you, Charlie. Isn't that wild? It's not as though you've done something to find quiet. You exist before the thought of you; that's the *you before you!* Deep within, there's perfection and pure potential clouded by years of relentless and tiresome thinking."

Tea sip.

An uncomfortable silence descended, followed by the same thought: 'He must be a nutter.'

Perhaps his assertions are true, perhaps not. It all sounded fluffy... and weird. A rush of anger hijacked the moment, racing through my body unannounced. It was a familiar feeling and very unwelcome. I wanted to slap him, shouting, 'Who do you think you are? What do you know about my life? And what's all this nonsense about space, quiet, magic carpet rides and 'the me before me?' I did no such thing, flopping across the tabletop to meet him halfway, desperately pleading for my sanity.

"But look at me! Why do I keep doing this?" I pleaded, arms outstretched, barely able to get the words out coherently and a tad embarrassed by my agitated tone. "Jerry—it's simple. I'm pathetic and a mistake."

He slowly brushed his hands through his hair again and leaned in closer, almost head-butting me.

"Not true, Charlie, no one is ever a mistake... ever! I mean, *ever!*"

Jerry's knuckles rapped against the tabletop. A young guy secretively shifted his posture at the adjacent table, probably curious to hear my retort before biting into his Danish whirl. Once again, though, I was dumbstruck, as if my mind had hit a brick wall with nowhere to go, no reference point, no next step. I bolted upright, purposefully creating distance between us.

"Sorry, Jerry, I disagree. I'm a misfit through and through," I said rather sharpish, still holding the young guy at the next table in my stare, his mouth half-open unable to take the first bite.

"Charlie, have you ever looked into a garden and noticed a withered plant struggling to find the light?"

I had seen such a plant, but the question didn't seem worthy of a reply. I turned to stare through the window.

"Would you think that plant's pathetic and a mistake?"

“No,” I snapped, again unintentionally and still avoiding eye contact, “I’d think it’s a pity it’s in the wrong spot.”

“Me too. But I’d also know the plant *has the same potential as all other plants*. It just needs a little help to find the sunshine, as do you.”

“Oh,” I said, “goodness...” That was all I could muster, my body frozen in time, rerunning the phrase over-and-over, ‘I have the same potential...’

Mr Danish, at the adjacent table, nodded with satisfaction as though he’d eavesdropped upon something meaningful, his fast-disappearing pastry testament to his contentment. But I, on the other hand, felt strange and totally at odds with myself. Do I genuinely have the same potential as others? And, like the plant metaphor, could it be as simple as finding something on a par with light?

“Charlie, you’re convinced you’re damaged goods. But could you at least consider things might not be as they appear? Could we be curious enough about life to prod and poke those limitations—those huge walls of impossibility and struggle, to see whether they’re solid or more permeable than we ever imagined?”

I didn’t speak. But my body answered affirmatively on my behalf again.

“Look, Charlie, if I gave you a blank canvas and paintbrush and asked what *could* you paint, what would you say? And I don’t mean what *would* you paint, but what *could* you paint?”

“I’m not sure. Anything, I guess? I *could* paint anything?”

“That’s right. We’re born into life presented with an infinite blank canvas, and quite innocently, many paint a life of limitation with the scope and imagination of a gnat. But we’re blessed with the capacity to look way beyond the boundaries we’ve crammed onto the canvas—we are the painter, and the limitations we paint that constrain us are illusory.”

I had nothing to add. It seemed like an unfathomable riddle, yet something within knew there was something here for me.

“Do you hear me? Can you feel there’s something useful in this conversation, or would you prefer we stop to enjoy our tea, and I escort you home?”

“Please don’t stop,” I begged, “it’s just that there’s so much baggage in my head it’s hard to focus. But yes, I do think you’re right. I guess what you’re saying is that I need re-planting?”

“Not exactly,” he said, laughing, “not re-planting; that’s not entirely my point. Without wanting to overdo the metaphor, you’re perfect where you are, and the metaphorical sunshine and life’s nutrients will eventually find you. You just need a little of the compost that sits in abundance within the metaphorical potting shed.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, somewhat confused.

“I mean *insight*, Charlie, the compost is *a realisation from within*, an ever-deepening appreciation of who we truly are and realising Principles that underpin all of our lives—no exceptions.

“And, unless I’m missing something,” he said, reaching across to gently tap the back of my hand, “I believe no exceptions... includes you?”

My heart pounded—whether through anxiety or excitement, I couldn’t fathom. Either way, I felt weird—quiet inside, yet somehow dishevelled.

Despite the odd feeling, I knew Jerry had spoken and listened to me with more compassion, care and love than I’d ever known. *A certainty oozed* from him, and I felt drawn to him—not so much to him as a person but more to his confidence and assuredness. His gentle spirit enveloped me, a softness wringing out all anger, frustration and resentment from within... yet doubts remained.

“I see,” I said softly, “I feel more at ease now, but I can’t see hope or a better life anywhere. I’ve searched, and it’s not there.”

“I understand, Charlie. But sometimes, it feels like we’re adrift on a rudderless boat—without direction and lost in the roughest seas with no land in sight. And I imagine you’ve felt that way for years, tirelessly fighting against it, pushing and pulling in vain at the tiller, and you’ve had enough.”

I nodded, ashamed and too embarrassed to meet his stare.

“But now a stranger has appeared,” he said, playfully pointing to his face with jazz hands, “and he’s bearing the eleventh commandment to proclaim the sea will calm, and hope waits patiently on the horizon. But history has painted a pitiful picture for you, so, this seems a step too far.”

“Precisely,” I said, still avoiding eye contact, “my past’s been so traumatic.”

“I know, Charlie,” he said softly, snuggling down into the chair. “But after working with a zillion clients, I’ve seen that the potential to create a bountiful life bears *absolutely no relation* to our past’s turbulent seas—no matter how traumatic. Those limitations that seem to hold us captive are mere pretenders; we innocently accept they’re our truth, mesmerised by made-up insecurities and blinkered by countless negative beliefs about ourselves and the world. It’s thinking we cling to—as though it has the last word. It’s no wonder we struggle.”

Silence.

“But now, through realisation, Charlie, it’s time to awaken—to stand on solid ground from where we can be curious, looking to the wisdom behind *everyone’s life—no exceptions*. We can all free ourselves to embrace an abundant life that’s more effortless, graceful, and blessed with ease—despite adversity. And by abundant, I’m not about talking material things, though that’s always possible—I mean a life rich in the spiritual sense, one that has meaning and is not defined by our preferences, needs, wants and must-haves.”

I stared through him, unsure of his words, until collapsing backwards into my seat, clasping both hands behind my head to quietly gaze at the ceiling.

“There you go,” he whispered, his voice barely audible. “Notice how much more peaceful it is for you right now.”

He threw himself hard into the back of the chair, arms outstretched as though pleading with me again to grasp his meaning. I remained motionless, still staring at the ceiling and unsure how to respond.

“I’d love to guide you,” he said, gently clearing his throat, a hint of embarrassment in his voice, “towards a truth that awakens within you a profound appreciation of life—far beyond the meagre offerings you’ve grown accustomed to.”

Again, more silence.

“There’s so much more on the menu, Charlie. And yet, the more astonishing truth is—we possess it all in abundance since birth, but we’ve forgotten.”

Feeling compelled by his words, I pulled myself upright, eager to hear more and nervously running my finger around the rim of my cup. But then, something struck me—and again, a feeling surged through my body—a sense of absolute certainty and trust in his words. And, though I genuinely wanted to remain quiet, I spoke, unsure of the words now forming.

“It’s funny, Jerry. It just dawned on me that *you* have absolute faith in life’s potential and believe deeply in the hope you’re pointing to.”

“Precisely,” he said, “Because they’re innate within everyone. I’m not asking you to add hope, grace and potential into your life but *inviting you to uncover them*, to move closer towards something resilient and hopeful which brings about freedom from unnecessary suffering.”

Once again, a gentle feeling spread through my body. Somehow, he’d said something that snuck through my defences and touched me deeply.

“I’m guessing that faint blush means you’ve heard something,” he said, “and perhaps there’s a glimmer of hope for you within that realisation?”

“There is,” I said, more confidently than I imagined possible. “Your certainty seems very deeply rooted. I can’t explain it, but *I can* sense those qualities of hope and grace within me, too, tucked away someplace deep, almost beyond reach, yet still faintly brushing against the reach of my fingertips. It’s a beautiful feeling, and I can’t justify it with words.”

Our eyes met. His were a deep blue too. It felt like we were two tuning forks, gradually awakening to the truth that we’re each vibrating the same note, each somehow intertwined and dancing along the same wavelength.

“Perfect,” he said, “and you’re right—my certainty is so deeply held that I have no doubts you’ll find a way through this. That’s my hope for everyone, regardless of what they’re facing. And that feeling you describe, that’s your wisdom whispering, ‘I’m here, I’m your guide—look in this direction.’”

He scribbled his phone number onto a napkin which I placed carefully into my back pocket. As we stood to leave, another peculiar feeling cascaded through my entire being. I tightly gripped the table’s edge.

“Are you OK?” he asked, reaching out to steady me.

“I feel strange, weightless, almost. What’s going on?” I said, unable to contain my giggles.

“You’ve lightened the load, Charlie, and the burden of heavy thinking has lifted—same circumstances, fresh thinking, different experience.”

It felt beautiful to surrender to feelings that, paradoxically, were unfamiliar and yet deeply satisfying, homely and known.

Mr Danish Pastry leant toward our table. “Excuse me,” he squeaked, his begging puppy-dog eyes vying for attention, “May I ask a question?”

“Sure,” I replied before self-consciously turning to Jerry, aware the question couldn’t have been directed at me. Danish fidgeted in his seat again, edging closer, having already accepted an unspoken invite.

“Sorry if it seems I’ve been nosey, but I’m *constantly* anxious,” he whispered, suspiciously eying the room. “Worrying about what others think about me and whether I’m good enough. And it drags me down because it’s incessant and feels... solid—and real. Any suggestions?”

Halfway into his jacket, Jerry crouched, resting his hand on Mr Danish’s shoulder and stared into his eyes. I was well acquainted with that look.

“Sure,” he said, “but if it’s OK with you, I’ll leave you with a quote that has deep meaning for me. If you hear something in the words, pop into the community centre where I regularly hold workshops. Would that work?”

And with that, in his now familiar tranquil voice, Jerry recited the quote.

“In every area of life, *everyone* is capable of seeing from a higher perspective than they do now. *You are never stuck*. You’re simply limited by the level you see from. Limitation is always an illusion. Just wait. Relax. Stay still and *wait until wisdom whispers to you*.ⁱⁱ”

“But *how* do I gain *that* higher perspective?” He asked.

“By listening, reflecting, and *turning inwards* with a *quieter mind*. Listen from here and not from here,” Jerry said, pointing from his head to his heart.

“It’s a Sydney Banks quote,” he said, turning to leave. “Look him up online, listen to what he has to say, and see if you can listen for the whispers of your inner wisdom instead of getting caught up in the anxious thoughts you’ve already thought.”

And with that, we left for home, pausing to rest only a few yards from my house, consumed by the tiredness that had washed over me. I rested against a manicured hedge, Mr Turnbull's hedge, no less.

"You'll feel better after a snooze, Charlie, but try not to dwell on everything we've said—that'll drive you more insane than you already think you are."

"Thank you." I said, again appreciating his light-heartedness and jest, "I'm grateful for your time."

Jerry leaned into the hedge too. And there we remained, contemplating the silence and the birds jostling for space in the wild hedgerows opposite. But then, Jerry abruptly jolted himself back upright.

"How's that rudderless boat holding up?" He asked, comically mimicking a rowing motion with both arms.

"Surprisingly calm and buoyant," I said, laughing and momentarily forgetting my tiredness. "But will it last?"

"Meh, probably not," he said, giggling again, "that's the nature of being human—it's a wild rally-cart ride with twists and turns and long calm stretches. But fighting the game of life to force those quiet stretches isn't an optimal direction; better to appreciate how the game is designed in the first place. The twists and turns then figure themselves out.

"Stay with that calm feeling, Charlie. It'll be your guide—we're drawn to what we like, towards comforting feelings.

"But you know what's intriguing?" he continued, "Chasing after better feelings can often lead to obsessions and addictions. But that's a tale for another time—I'm sorry, I get carried away sometimes."

"I see," I said, unsure whether to probe further. But then something came to mind. "Can I ask why you told that guy in the café that limitation is an illusion? He was so stressed—so I don't understand."

"Charlie, I don't expect you to understand. And me too! Sometimes these things seem obvious, and other times entirely unfathomable. But if we briefly touch on your question, promise you'll let it go afterwards. Trying to figure this intellectually isn't helpful. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

“Alright, firstly, in the café, that quote simply popped into my head, and I trusted it—it was an intuition that felt right. He did say his issues were *solid and real*, so I guess he’d never considered that insecurity is made of thought and can’t ever be solid. It’s only ever real as long as we think it.”

A quiet, ponderous sigh escaped me as I sank deeper into the hedgerow.

“I get it, Charlie. It’s not easy to grasp. But look,” he said, stepping back to appraise my relaxed posture. “Here you are—curious, settled, smiling and melting into the hedgerow as though life’s a breeze. Yet just a few hours ago, life seemed too overwhelming to bear.

“And yet *nothing’s changed*,” he said, his arms flailing about, gesturing along the street. “Everything’s exactly as earlier, except you’re now less limited by those dark thoughts and the reality they created. What do *you* make of that?”

ⁱ <https://www.ianrank-broadley.co.uk>

ⁱⁱ Sydney Banks: Sydneybanks.org