Recently, in the wintertime, I was seized by high spirits. The snow lay thick; it was one of those cold spells in Berlin when everything freezes under a hard and smooth layer of white. My daughter, Emma, and I were taking a walk. We led our poodle into the little park behind the bend. There, the meadow slopes gently down to a small pond. The city cleaning department uses it as a spillway for overburdened drainage lines, but in the winter, when a frozen white sheet covers the water, this doesn’t matter.

The black poodle romped through the white. My daughter insisted that she and I also “have fun.” I had to make a bit of an effort, because I felt a little weariness in my muscles and my aging bones (it was getting harder to conceal it). I would have been very happy just to stand still. But in the end I don’t regret letting myself get carried away. How often have I simply “had fun” with my daughter during her life and not used some sort of adult concerns as an excuse to beg out of it? Only a few times, certainly, and all of them are among my most treasured memories.

“Having fun” was the code word for rolling together down a hillside without paying any attention to what the ground might have in store for us. Emma had contrived the activity a few years earlier in the sand dunes of the North Sea island of Spiekeroog during a short vacation there, in
the sand dunes behind the beach where children actually aren’t supposed to “have fun,” in the interest of protecting the coastline.

On that winter’s day, we let ourselves roll through the snow down to the pond, pulled along by gravity, our collars full of melting ice crystals, our skin wet and red, breathlessly gasping with intensity. Then we piled up a mountain of snow as a ramp for our Olympic toboggan run. Emma had discovered a torn black garbage bag in the shrubbery. A bit of dog urine had yellowed the snow, but we laughed about it and paid it no mind—as I said, this was “having fun” in the city winter of Berlin. And then we sped down the hillside together on the plastic, Emma in front, I behind, the poodle growling behind us in a snow cloud of exaltation. We spun around, rolled through the ice crystals, and then dove with reddened faces deep into the frozen white.

Again, again! My daughter would not be dissuaded. All the spinning made me feel a little nauseous, but the rapture of the swaying and the speed let me forget the dizziness and the cold. We only stopped once we were completely sweaty inside our clothes and completely soaked through on the outside. For the duration of those fleeting moments, everything was in harmony; for a flash, everything was in accord, nothing was missing. We were completely there. We were a ball made of three life-forms that transformed the snow in that humble park into an arena of exaltation. Nobody needed to tell us what to do, or how. That came from the wisdom of our muscles, of our sensory cells, from the wisdom of the crystalline world that held us. We did something completely useless—namely, the very thing for which all beings are created.

We played.

We were completely alive.

Living joy is life as play. Loving the world means playing with it, in it, with ourselves and each other. Such that nothing is necessary, but everything plays a role.

In play, we comprehend aliveness

Life-forms play. Anecdotes report that not only human children become immersed in “having fun” or creating whole fictional worlds. We also
know of playfully tussling rat babies, wound-up great cat parents, and elephant grandpas who let themselves be carried away with uninhibited frivolity. According to some biologists, even ants and termites play with one another.²

The finding that play is so widely distributed among other beings is harder for evolutionary biologists to explain than almost anything else. According to Darwinism’s economical view of reality, wherein everything that exists must be useful, it is hard to explain why young tigers risk their necks out of playful curiosity, or why, for example, a full-grown stag would expend energy on something that did not contribute to the dissemination of his genes. Since even older animals play—and adult human beings, like Emma’s father—the long-held “standard” explanation for such frivolous high spirits, which claims that play is a preparatory exercise for activity that will be useful later, no longer has any traction.

Play does, however, make one thing possible: creating relationships. It is not actually training for the serious business of acquiring nourishment or forcefully defending territory, but for imaginative participation in the creative universe and for one’s role within it. So play comes very close to being a comprehension of one’s own aliveness. Play is an instance of expression and thereby one of the most important manifestations of erotic ecology. It is the model for an existence that is not subjected to functionalism but boldly carries forth the natural history of freedom and expresses individuality.

Cats do not swipe at balls of yarn in order to practice catching mice, but because it is in their nature as cats to experience their own bodily vigor in the activity of hunting. Just as predators take joy in the hunt (dogs stalking after mice wag their tails enthusiastically), every being takes joy in the activity wherein it experiences and expresses its own nature. Young human beings do not just play with puppets (or games of “mother and child” with one another) because they want to study the useful laws of parenthood, but because it is their nature to enter into nurturing and caring relationships. In play they can sound out and alter their own capacities to relate in free creativity.

We can therefore say that play is the realization of being alive, is sculptural work with the raw materials of that “pure aliveness” that
Octavio Paz identifies as the deepest core of our experience. In play children—and whelps of all sorts—poetize their world. The interesting thing about this is that they already have everything they need for this activity. They follow a creative program that they experience as an instincutal desire for play—one that unerringly shows them the right way. Children do not practice their humanity by playing but express it, and thereby experience it for the first time, by establishing an identity. This construction of identity is likewise an exchange that occurs in relationships, through and through. So playing means forging life-inducing relationships—and also life-harming ones, which one also learns to distance oneself from by playing.

In play the paradox of the relationship between the well-known self and the unknown other is restaged. Playing children seek out themes, places, methods with which they can try out well-known things on the one hand and have to take risks on unknown things on the other. Every day, they venture a little farther out on their quests in the meadows, climbing first onto just the lower branches of the tree, then a little higher the next day. They constantly seek out edges and zones of transformation—like the ones that form where the woods become meadow in the border region of the blooming hedge.

Children are themselves the essence of the living. They are prompted to be aimlessly creative in that undetermined zone between risk and security. In play they constantly define life as the creative transition between control and uncontrollableness. The fact that this is life can be directly experienced and becomes visible in the intensive absorption of their concentrated expressions, which can turn into rolling laughter in the blink of an eye.

Play thus reveals itself as a practice of loving the world.

*Love as a practice of aliveness*

Astonishingly enough: Our children are masters of this practice from birth. This insight contradicts a tradition of thought that is still influential to this day: that children are unbridled and wild and must therefore be groomed—raised—with force and severity. The grandfather of depth
psychology, Sigmund Freud, assembled a terrible list of immature psychological stages that we go through in childhood (for example, the anal stage followed by polymorphous perversity followed by the oedipal stage). Freud was convinced that a human being, at the beginning of his or her life, is as fundamentally gruesome and dangerous as the rest of the natural world. He therefore thought that everybody had to learn to “sublimate” their drives for sex and destruction into culture. With discipline and order, if necessary.

With this, Freud founded a particularly influential variant of the ancient Western understanding that deeply mistrusted life and its forces that sought health and fulfillment. Subliminally, we still conceive of children and their needs, in many ways, as part of a threatening wilderness: impenetrable, hard to control, and necessary to tame, no matter the cost. Immediately upon being born, young people are subjected to our drive to get away from all contradictions. This process also follows our civilization’s unconscious conviction that death can be mastered by technology. Children mutate nowadays into success-oriented projects. Our child-rearing is supposed to arm them as best as possible against any misfortune. Children should, so to speak, achieve symbolic immortality by gaining proficiencies, assertiveness, and motivation.

In our fervor, we overlook the fact that children generally know better than we do what it is to be alive. We likewise overlook the fact that nothing can truly rescue us once we have unlearned what it is to be alive. When we forget to orient ourselves toward those foundational principles according to which creative reality constantly unfolds, all of our projects are endangered. Yet aliveness is seldom a goal of child-rearing. Child-rearing is, on the contrary, “give and demand”: we constantly want something from our children so that they become better. But we cannot recognize that they have something to give us precisely due to the fact that they are already perfect as living beings. The child’s gift to us is the knowledge that people already have everything they are looking for. We simply must not allow it to be taken out of our hands.

That precious thing that we already have at the beginning of life is our love for the world. In play the child loves the world by not only reconstructing it, fascinated and in awe, but by adding new creations of its own.
And children love themselves in the world by savoring their delight in it and allowing themselves to be inspired. A child is born with everything that it needs to participate in the world’s interrelatedness by means of self-generated creative relationships. A cosmic genius thus inheres in the child’s capacity for play: The playing child places itself in the position of a universal force that constantly creates new connections, varies existing ones, and thereby helps the whole express and experience itself more deeply. All of us do nothing less than this when we play—the human whelps, the ants, all of the interwoven species of our vast ecosystem.

Children come into the world and know how to produce their identities through acts of interrelation. Isn’t that wonderful? Shouldn’t we, in our civilized isolation, take this up as a positive example? Unfortunately, we mostly do the opposite. We continue to believe that we have to teach our children the crucial things instead of accepting that they already know them, whereas we adults, on the other hand, have unlearned them. So it is a matter of allowing children to rejoice in this knowledge and claim their wholly individual way of being in relationship with the world. Children only need to be given a few elements of our cultural code in order to do this more fully: written language, mathematical conventions, technical capabilities.

Children are capable of playing. And children are capable of loving. And this is precisely what many adults most deeply abuse in their wish to educate and raise their children: They prey upon their children’s aliveness in order to strengthen their own, which they lost because their own prior connection with the creative world was snatched away from them. Many parents do not love their children but let themselves be loved by them, with all of the desperation that a child can summon in his or her effort to help a person who actually was supposed to protect this very same child.

Almost nobody has delved deeper into these relationships than the Swiss childhood researcher Alice Miller. She arrived at the insight that the trauma people suffer is the loss of their aliveness in childhood. The secure knowledge and intuitive confidence that their own impulses accorded with the creative world and were deeply correct were driven out of them. As a result, these adults are no longer in a position to act appropriately according to these impulses. Aliveness means being in a
position to play with one’s own possibilities because one is secure in the knowledge of being sufficient, because one feels allowed to assert oneself as an individual part of the whole creative cosmos. With precisely this, with this assurance, a small child can hold the adults around it transfixed. And this assurance can also be taken away from a child so easily.

Playing means enacting this assurance to be a creative part contributing to making the whole flourish. It is a highly imaginative and extremely serious way of grasping the “terms of life” that Schnarch speaks about, a way of exploring them by transforming them into one’s particular, personal style. Playing is the child’s method of embodying its own role in the ecology of relationships. The role of the child’s caregiver in this process is likewise to follow the terms of life. To do so, he or she must enter as a partner into a relationship that allows the other to become more real, meaning it allows the other to become what he or she already is and therefore yearns to be. The caregiver must help the child transform itself constantly—not into a paragon of parental wishes or fears but into what it already is, even if this still slumbers, enfolded, within it.

“Mental death”

The failure of our civilization in the ecology of loving relationships overlaps with many parents’ failure to give their children the necessary space for this transformation. They fail because their own fear of aliveness, learned in their childhoods, sucks greedily at the young aliveness of their children, preventing them from establishing a sympathetic connection to the ecosystem of reality.

As a result, something crucial fails to occur. The reciprocity through which two partners gift more life to one another is consistently destroyed. The stronger partners—the formerly tortured parents—exploit the weaker ones—the trusting children. They sap energy from the life force and the trust in life with which children come into the world. They get rich on their children’s willingness to give unconditionally. Because the children cannot recognize that their caregivers are responsible for the lack of generosity, they unconsciously blame themselves and begin to regard the stirrings of their own aliveness as bad and harmful. Gradually,
they believe that they are not actually alive anymore, that only the others are alive, that they are dead on the inside. As they age, they increasingly internalize the modern myth of a world that is deeply dead, because the agonizing awareness of their own nonexistence can best be concealed and hidden within that world’s requirements and distractions.

Miller observes: “Every child has a legitimate need to be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by his mother. In the first weeks and months of life he needs to have the mother at his disposal, must be able to avail himself of her and be mirrored by her.” Miller refers to the British psychologist and researcher of play, Donald Winnicott, who observes in the relationship of mother and child the kind of reciprocal creativity that I analyzed in the last chapter: “The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother’s face and finds himself therein,” Winnicott says, “provided that the mother is really looking at the unique, small, helpless being and not projecting her own expectations, fears, and plans for the child. In that case, the child would find not himself in his mother’s face, but rather the mother’s own projections. This child would remain without a mirror, and for the rest of his life would be seeking this mirror in vain.”

Only this sort of trusting being-in-relationship allows children to really feel their physical and emotional needs. If they experience these needs as unwelcome, then they go the way of a trauma victim, a hostage, an abductee—in other words, those who experience that their wishes for escape and for freedom lead to life-threatening situations. People in such circumstances learn to eliminate these feelings from their consciousness. To mitigate the fear of death, it helps to recognize the human side of one’s kidnapper and ignore the violent side. At some point, prisoners can no longer grasp the full complexity of their guards and perceive them as either good or evil, depending on how they act—a kind of black-and-white thinking that makes it possible to survive but not to be alive. But shutting off certain feelings leads to the alternative of experiencing oneself either as simply functioning or rather as inadequate. One’s own genuine identity falls by the wayside.

The Australian trauma researchers Angela Ebert and Murray Dyck refer to this experience as “mental death.” This is all the more true for
little children, whose fragile identities do not have the means at their disposal to receive assurances from the world when they are denied them by their closest contacts. Infants do not read poetry or self-help books. Ebert and Dyck describe the collapse of personal autonomy and the vague feeling of being damaged as symptoms of “mental death.” Mental death means the death of feelings—and with that, the abdication of one’s own aliveness for the sake of naked survival.

Being alive—creatively expanding the network of relationships through reciprocity—means being allowed to feel everything and thereby not being forced to weed anything out. Aliveness means being allowed to be completely real, in all dimensions of existence. But this is precisely what is hindered by the traumas of the childhood years. They destroy aliveness—and are thereby the echo of our world, which above all else lacks a deep understanding of aliveness, and the courage to recognize it.

“Toxic” relationships

The trauma that many experience early in childhood is a catastrophe of broken reciprocity. It is ecological because it impairs our capacity for connection, which is the basis for all other capabilities. And it is existential because it endangers the continued life of those affected by it. The tragedy begins when we pay no attention to our own aliveness. When we instead listen to what others say, or to the echo that others’ decrees (those of our parents or our teachers) leave behind in us. For the individual, this results in a feeling of worthlessness and also a constant effort to conceal this imagined worthlessness. We obediently deny our own legitimate needs and thereby switch off all the dangerous feelings connected with these needs. As a result of these traumas, those affected by them substitute in a better-looking construct—and they also do everything they can to prevent those substitutions from being uncovered.

Susan Forward uses the term “toxic” when referring to the effect of people who do not act on behalf of aliveness but seek to whitewash their own fear of it—toxic like a mercury solution that poisons a river and kills its many inhabitants. When people are toxic, it is always a conspiracy against aliveness, including their own. Somebody acts toxically when
he or she sees me not as I am, or as I attempt to be, but instead sees me filtered through his or her own fears and expectations. People are toxic when they consider themselves deeply inferior and therefore wish to control everything simply so that alleged truths about themselves do not come to light. People are toxic when they are not only afraid but also allow themselves to be led by the nose by these fears, and then unconsciously blame others in order to cover up their panic.

Psychologists attribute such behavior to personality disorders. These disorders, along with other torments of aliveness, like depression, are consistently on the rise. According to statistics from the WHO, one-fourth of all the residents of Earth (and counting) battle with emotional-mental problems at one point in their lives. Our relationships are at the center of these ailments. We can therefore say that nowadays the great pains of love constitute a widespread epidemic.

Personality disorders are illnesses of the emotions and thereby pathologies of aliveness and of living feelings. Those afflicted by them cannot sustain the contradictory richness of a relationship but must forcefully produce definiteness and black-and-white contours: control at the cost of truth. Some researchers claim that up to 15 percent of the Western population is afflicted by such disorders. All who suffer such disturbances are united by the trauma of an early destruction of their emotional capacity for relationships: They will do almost anything to conceal from others their feelings of inferiority. They deny their problems so effectively that they can only perceive their own destructive characteristics by ascribing them to the other. Someone else is always to blame. And it is easiest to assign this blame to one’s children, because they will not rebel against it. They will do anything to iron out that guilt, to prove themselves worthy, to be seen, until they are finally so broken that, as adults, they will rob their own children of aliveness.

The childhood researcher Christine Ann Lawson has observed that an emotional disturbance in childhood that plants the seed for the destruction of a person’s personal, self-affirming aliveness will usually be passed along to that person’s descendants. Those whose aliveness has been trampled will desperately use others in order to enliven themselves. The poisoning of aliveness among human beings in a family and in schools
is a quiet tragedy. Many assume that it cannot be any other way. They shrug their shoulders so as not to be too intensely reminded of wounds from long ago, suffered in silence, that have still not healed completely below the scar. Concerning their own aliveness, they conduct themselves in a manner similar to how they act toward others: They try to make themselves believe that the trauma is not bad enough to require real examination, and they seek distraction.

**Emotional capitalism**

The individual dilemma is also so difficult to see because the official way of interpreting reality claims that our feeling is a chimera. The currently dominant picture of life accepts the purportedly universal drive to function better than others in order to survive in the war of all against all. Our society has made the continuous violation of aliveness into one of its defining principles. The avalanching destruction of other forms of life reflects how severely individual emotional life has been destroyed. What makes the current consternation of reality so virulent, and thereby into a candidate for the emotional mainstream, is the fact that our whole climate of living and thinking enshrines a narcissistic worldview of exploitation. The obliteration of feelings does not have a solely private pathological dimension. Personal narcissism is also an echo of cultural narcissism, and vice versa.

Our individual psychological doom manifests collectively as a universal ecological calamity. Both are interwoven with one another. Both are symptoms of a fundamental misunderstanding of ourselves and of reality. In a world of ruined aliveness, it is impossible to be alive oneself. Both inner aliveness and the aliveness of the natural world are facets of something deeply interconnected. As such, the I is indebted to the You, the health of our loving relationships guaranteed only by the ecological health of a world that is constituted by those same relationships.

The blindness that prevents us from seeing this connection can be referred to as “emotional capitalism.” Emotional capitalism entails both emotional and ecological abuse. Emotional capitalism transforms the world into something dead in order to evade one’s own death. It is a
misuse of reality as a disposal product, void of all relationships. It leads directly into the prosperous hell of substitute satisfactions, suggesting that one can erect a small, comforting shield against death.

Emotional capitalism means refusing to accept your own mortality, means denying it at any cost and thereby accepting, or even taking advantage of, another’s death. The Parisian psychologist Marie-France Hirigoyen calls such behavior “perverse.” “Perverse” comes from the Latin verb _pervertere_. The word means “to overturn” but also “to obliterate.” Perversity is behavior that is turned against the path of aliveness. Perversity is the refusal to understand and to accept the dilemma of existence—namely, the fact that we exist in a middle ground between vulnerability and creative power and that our aliveness always includes something of both. Perversity is not recognizing your own weaknesses but looking for them and battling them in others.¹⁰

Emotional capitalism leads to an isolation of the individual caused by traumatic errors. It absolutizes this experience into a worldview in which separation, the fight for survival, and violence are fundamental constants. It reiterates a mantra of total disconnection that allows everything and everyone to be harmlessly turned into a resource. Emotional capitalism asserts that misuse is unavoidable and compensates for it by promising that the salvation from all evil will be achieved in the near future. It occurs in gestures of possession and of avarice for more. It cultivates feelings of being in the right, not practices of listening. It seeks, in the words of psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, to make violence enjoyable. Emotional capitalism means making the impossibility of love into a guiding principle of life and also preaching this impossibility as a scientific description of the world.

In a world in which a loss of differentiation is the order of the day, in which the natural creation around us is constantly impoverished, “mental death” becomes a diagnosis that threatens all of us. Like some people who are not able to offer their partners a reciprocal relationship, thereby poisoning them invisibly, we, too, let ourselves starve inwardly by clipping the ties to life all around us. Of course, when we have no relationship to all of the countless species that nourish us, satisfy our feelings, and help us understand our corporeality, we lock ourselves up in
a traumatic prison. But like all true trauma victims, we have no real idea what is causing our suffering. We try ever more to control it, even though this is precisely what makes everything worse.

It is difficult to answer the question, how a society made up of many individuals whose utmost desire is to control their feelings of self-worth can be exhorted to take account of the principles of aliveness. It demands a great deal of nerve and also the willingness to accept the risk of personal failure. Trying to be real here means at the same time acting politically: Having the courage to feel your own needs and also to trust those feelings amounts to having the guts to stand up publicly and demand a different politics, one suitable to the demands of aliveness.

Both are connected with a great inner necessity for those who have been traumatized and are familiar with the terms of imprisonment. Standing up in public like that requires you to give yourself the right to be. And precisely this—granting yourself the right to your own individuality without any permission "from above"—is so difficult when your own life did not begin with the reciprocity of a living relationship.

Those who would advocate for the rights of aliveness in the world must first award themselves the right to be alive. They must practice looking at themselves with love and accepting their own needs. Only then will their efforts succeed in not passing along a trauma, in not denying to others the right to their own experiences for the sake of the "proper cause," and in not being willing to sacrifice other things and other people for the sake of the "good." Those who would fight for aliveness must first fight for their own feelings.

**The barometer of our emotional ecology**

Our feelings are the dimension in which we are "inwardly" shown whether our ecology of mutual exchange is fruitful. Consequently, they have a quasi objective character and are never just personal fantasies. Feelings are the barometer of aliveness within us. They are the inner form of the outer state of a stretch of landscape that we can directly comprehend through our senses: a blooming meadow, a clear-cut wood. Feelings are the meaning of our inner life circumstances. They are what we are—not what
others are. Susan Forward encourages us to trust our view of this inner landscape. It is also always right, just as trees and flowers cannot lie. “No matter how confused, self-doubting, or ambivalent we are about what’s happening in our interactions with other people, we can never entirely silence the inner voice that always tells us the truth,” writes Forward.¹¹

Feelings are the voice of truth about our existential position. They are subjective because they deal with our flourishing. But they are also objective because they express the measure of our aliveness. They are the expressed experience of our own ecological equilibrium. Or to put it more clearly: Emotions are a poetic commentary on our own existence, just as indirect, just as creative, just as difficult to suppress as an outcry, a drawing, a verse, a melody, a landscape, whose emotional substance shakes us to the core.

Feeling is the partisan squad of the individual I, a group that is always in the know and must therefore be muzzled by all oppressors. “These people have all developed the art of not experiencing feelings, for a child can experience her feelings only when there is somebody there who accepts her fully, understands her, and supports her,” says Alice Miller.¹² But without feelings, in which a person’s own needs can be expressed, those needs are without a voice. Yet only when we listen to and know and recognize our needs are we truly connected with our true, living selves. Only then can we trust our own perceptions, for they show us what truly is.

On the other hand, people will form a “false self” as adults if they were made to feel, as children, that the healthy experience of their own aliveness and their natural needs threatened them with annihilation.¹³ They subconsciously strive for the identity that they were allowed to adopt, rather than the one that slumbers within them. This is also a creative process, of course. It unfolds with the same resilience with which the natural world transforms catastrophes into stories of survival. A river that has been flooded with toxic fluids is still a river. It becomes a “dead zone”—it lacks almost all oxygen. But still it is not truly lifeless. It transforms into a body of water with low diversity, where only algae, bacteria, and rotifers can flourish. The river preserves its connection to aliveness. To be sure, it exists at a much less differentiated level than it
did before the poisoning. Viktor von Weizsäcker recognized that even in a moment of brokenness, the forces of creativity prevail; as he said: “Every sickness is an incomplete act of creation.”¹⁴

These creative acts are always expressed as bodily gestures. The natural world conveys to us, through such gestures, its inner conditions. Unlike a human being, the natural world discloses its existential constitution to us without shyness, shame, or ulterior motives. This is not a conscious process, but at the same time, such experiences are not concealed. Monotone plantations and colorless acres speak volumes about the extent to which creation is no longer active within them. Nature can thus be defined as a space in which the experience of aliveness is revealed. In it, the actions of plants and animals always show their feelings honestly and forthrightly. They are evident in their bodies. They continually allow us to recognize how they are getting by in life, whether they are flourishing or doing poorly. They appear dried up, are shaggy, full of flowers; they carry themselves feebly or appear in powerful flight. As such, they are acts of creation that have become visible, that stand before our senses, that invite us to partake in them so that we might feel our own feelings again.

In the web of life-forms, everything that we need to know for the unfolding of a healthy identity searches for its expression. This is one of the significant reasons nature is able to offer us comfort and support, whereas we are so keen to hide these experiences and the feelings that accompany them from ourselves and from others. Particularly for children and adolescents, such a frame of reference is existentially significant. Nature is fully alive. That means that it shows all its truth without shame. Seen in this way, the natural world is the ultimate reality that can embolden us to take the same risk of truly being. It is the place that offers comfort when our needs run up against denial or ignorance. It is the space that conceals no feelings and therefore allows us to admit our own feelings. In the inside of nature there is no unsuitable or false aliveness. The natural world is further removed from totalitarian action than any form of human achievement could ever be.

Nature grants to everything its authentic self. Our ecological relationship thus becomes the prerequisite for the principles of personal emotional authenticity. These principles are precisely what children
attempt to unfold in reciprocal exchange with their caregivers, who often forbid this unfolding. No self-determined life is possible without this space of free emotion. The American psychologist and pioneer of family therapy Virginia Satir calls these principles the “five freedoms.” They are imperative in order to claim a feeling identity and to acknowledge the same in others.

The “five freedoms” are:

1. The freedom to see and hear what is here, instead of what should be, or will be.
2. The freedom to say what you feel and think, instead of what you should.
3. The freedom to feel what you feel, instead of what you ought.
4. The freedom to ask for what you want, instead of always waiting for permission.
5. The freedom to take risks on your own behalf, instead of choosing to be only “secure and not rocking the boat.”¹⁵

According to these precepts, a good relationship is always also an ecologically stable relationship: one in which truth is active. “To live in truth”—for the ecophilosopher David Abram this is the actual reason that we might seek to protect a landscape and to make our peace with it.¹⁶ Both sides participate in such a relationship. They can transform themselves within it and do not need to conceal reality. In other words, this also means: For as long as I perceive even one catkin in the springtime, I am working against oppression.

The transformations of love are only imaginable when nothing is withheld. We can only gain access to such transformations, and thereby to the maturity of adulthood, by allowing ourselves to see, to feel, and to express what we experience. If there is no openness for this transformation, love has it tough, because it is the transformative element par excellence. Accordingly, the psychologist Abraham Maslow observes: “We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world.”¹⁷
I remember one early spring day when I had captured two insects in my kitchen in Liguria that had emerged from the stack of firewood. The two black-and-yellow-striped longhorn beetles at first climbed restlessly up and down the walls of the empty honey jar in which I had barricaded them. At some point, I added a bit of clover to the jar. Immediately the two beetles began to mate—they had forgotten they were imprisoned. The blossoming plant had transformed the threat into the ecstasy of the new year.

For the duration of our lives, we struggle to gain the “five freedoms,” whereas nonhuman creatures and people in the first months of their lives guilelessly embody them. Their confident aliveness is the ludic model that we can think back on for the rest of our existence. In order to allow ourselves to become ourselves, we have to feel as they do—and as we did at the very beginning—once again. We have to admit our needs and articulate them. When we listen to our needs, we can also perceive those of others. In that moment, the reciprocity foundational to aliveness for all is restored.

**Trusting your own death**

The natural world is the mistress of a reality of personal experience. But only because she is not a kindly “mother” who reconciles us with everything and houses us under her protective cloak, only because true death awaits everything and because nothing can conceal the genuine possibility of it. Anyone who has ever been lost in the wilderness can empathize with this feeling: Dying is a possibility! Nature does not hide this fact. On the contrary, it sculpts with it: Every currently living species exists at the expense of hundreds of others that have long been lost. The tremendously salutary realism of the natural world is composed of such expirations. The opposite of emotional capitalism and the “mental death” that results from it is not, therefore, the “good mother Earth,” where only symbiosis is operative. Rather, it is love as an ecological practice that accepts the presence of death in its midst.

Dying is essential to awakening from the torpor of insufficient aliveness. Becoming alive means experiencing the death that you have feared since childhood, because it was always there at the dinner table.
as a constant threat to your own aliveness. It is therefore imperative to grasp, in your own life, that dying is actually the part of life that you have sought for so long. Only after we have gone through the death of our own central personal concern will this concern really become legitimate. Only then will it bestow upon us the identity that we seek.

This same courageous dying is something that children should learn from their parents. Yet because parents often need their children in order to survive emotionally themselves, they refuse them the experience of this good death. I am not referring to actual death, of course. I mean situations in which the terms of life demand that one surrender to them and also convey trust to another with a loving gaze: This situation is survivable. Situations like a fight among schoolmates, a flunked math assignment, an unfinished first treehouse, a skinned knee, the first childhood illness. Supporting someone in these passages through death requires that the caretakers both let go and be constantly present. Instead of protecting, they should help by simply being present with the affected person when something goes wrong.

Good parents allow children to experience failures, because they don't judge and don't control. They enliven their children because they trust. They see their children's living resilience and know that it can get them through things. They enliven because they demand no reward and do not downgrade their children to a means to an end, but offer them existence as ends unto themselves.

Trust, that advance payment on the future, is also something that the natural world gives to us. It is the place that says, “Look, I do not change, I remain the same, whatever you might do with me.” It makes no evaluations, but elastically springs back into an accepting state of equanimity, like a young birch sapling in spring that children bend to the Earth in their exuberant play.

The paradox of the “principles of life” cannot be resolved; it can only be personally lived—and personally died. There is no path into the ideal world. The rift is irremediable, because it is a component part of creation—indeed, it is the very thing that made creation possible.

Leonard Cohen got to the heart of this in a few short lines in his song “Anthem”:
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything,
That’s how the light gets in.¹⁸

The fear of death, on the other hand, never leads us to escape it. Often, it results in our sending others to their deaths. The fear of death beguiles us into refusing transformation. Refusing to accept that death, which is a necessary part of life, brings life to a standstill.

Because we human beings are so afraid of dying, we must constantly relearn a culture of life. But not just as individuals. Nowadays we should recall collectively as a civilization that such a culture is necessary in order to make space for life. Perhaps this is our task during this critical time on the planet. So much dying brings about the forceful realization that due to our fear of death and our lust for eternity, we have repressed things that other societies at other times perhaps understood better than we do. A culture of life entails a constantly renewing creative freedom with respect to the inevitable necessity of death, in order to share the world with one another as feeling bodies bound to the terms of their biological physicality. In this culture, two things are important: acting freely, but also accepting necessity. Only a culture of life has the chance to develop the same acceptance of failure and conducive austerity that is constantly self-produced within ecological reality. Ernest Becker writes: “If neurosis is sin, and not disease, then the only thing which can ‘cure’ it is a world-view, some kind of affirmative collective ideology in which the person can perform the living drama of his acceptance as a creature.”¹⁹

Merely to think about the possibility of such a culture nowadays is, at the very least, a task not only for individual emotional survival but also for the continuation of our collective existence as a civilization. A culture of life could provide us with that piece of ecological insight that we lack by nature, because we have more freedom in our actions than every other biological species. Other species’ aliveness is part of their natures. We have to freely choose to engage with our own aliveness. The necessity of culture thereby shapes our natural condition. And this is precisely why our nature as a culture must include the body and its unfathomable capacities for expression. Unlike our companions in the animal and
plant kingdoms, we can only live the natural state by recognizing it and actively making it into the goal of our actions. We recognize our nature by uniquely restaging it in our own state of freedom.

For this, we must freely choose to constantly recreate the principles of life that are indissolubly bound to our bodies. Because culture is the creative staging of our natural state, it cannot be allowed to pretend that we are above the principle of living existence and the terms of creative relationships. The behavior of a species is a variation on the necessary principles of its aliveness in the context of other living beings, a negotiation, a creative implementation of possibilities. Within this limited framework, a culture of life could unfold. It is creation in an interplay between our self-instantiation and the principles of reality, through which both dimensions can be more deeply and clearly experienced.

Considering the situation of the planet, we should do everything possible to explore how such a culture of life could be provided for. These considerations can bring a new motif into play: the acceptance of being real, of just being what there is, and with it the productive determination to renounce all appeals to the superhuman or to that which is outside of reality. The dominance of Western thinking during the last millennia has surrendered culture all too often to utopias of salvation. It has, however, barely sought to generate the compromises that would be required to become fully enlivened within the imperfect conditions of reality. But if culture denies the mortal share of our existence and seeks to overcome our creatureliness, it is unsurprising that it should scorn and destroy the actual natural world, outside and inside ourselves—for nature is both the guarantor of our vulnerable existence as creatures and a lasting reminder of it.

Ernest Becker says that, “culture is . . . a heroic denial of creatureliness.”²⁰ According to Becker, the central misery of all cultures (not just ours) is the denial brought about by our permanent fear of death. He observed that people of all eras have striven for immortality by various means: the worship of omnipresent ancestors in rocks and trees, the eternal life that awaits all true believers, the technological deliverance that will allow the world to be conquered. There has always been a heroic path to immortality. Following this path has always required strict rules
that required one to give up the very thing that was supposed to be preserved: one's own aliveness.

Becker belongs to a school of humanist psychologists that includes Erich Fromm, Rollo May and his previously mentioned colleague Abraham Maslow, Virginia Satir, and also Alice Miller. What all of these thinkers have in common is that they accept the embodied reality of our existence and understand health through the ways in which we invent creative solutions to its inescapable dilemmas, and also in the ways that we fail.

Like his fellow combatants, Becker thereby razes the ambitious edifice that Sigmund Freud erected. For Becker, our deep dilemma is not the repression of our sexuality, but the repression of our consciousness of death. Neuroses and psychoses are, according to Becker, various forms that manifest the suffering of people who have lost the courage to advocate for their own reality in spite of their fear of death.²¹ In addition, Becker’s colleague Wilfred Bion directs our attention to a critical aspect of this same theme: “The fundamental problem is, how soon can human beings reconcile themselves to the fact that the truth matters?”²²

**Character armor and romantic love**

To love—which is to say, to live and let live in the deepest sense—is not a deliverance from death. To love is to welcome death and its mysterious, unending power of transformation and creation. The philosopher Hildegard Kurt writes: “Listening [to others or to the Other, A. W.] begins where I die.”²³ All of this is silenced in the pleasant myths of the “warrior of the light”²⁴ that are currently circulating. They push for aesthetic heroism. They, too, preach a form of heroism to which one can gain entry simply through proper behavior. They conceal what Rilke expressed in his requiem: “Who speaks of victory? To endure is all.”²⁵ But not endurance in the sense of survival, in the sense of some discontented perseverance, but as that oft-described state of drifting, all senses open wide. As openness for the creation that is always the Other, never the Ego.

Love that risks one’s own death in order to make space for aliveness is not part of our culture. It remains the heroic act of the individual. The fear of death is, however, so great that people often cause particular
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offense when trying to be alive and showing that it is really possible to exist openly above the abyss of nonbeing. Of feeling all. The fear of death is so great that emotions appear dangerous and are supposed to take up as little space as possible. Anyone who displays them too naturally is suspect. Anyone who believes in them is dismissed with a weary, ironic smile. Children, of course, often cause offense. Children—wild, naïve, unadjusted, thoughtlessly aggressive, boundlessly generous. Children, who fall down and stand up over and over again: In a culture that seeks at any cost to repress all forms of failure as omens of mortality, children are dangerous.

But even adults have it hard if they do not submit to the standards that control risk (both of life and of death) or (worse still) do not exercise such control themselves. Paradoxically, they attract hatred and rejection, even though they possess more of what everyone so desperately covets. But the vivacious, generous person who is friendly without any ulterior motives also demonstrates constantly that he or she has something that others do not. If people’s guilt and shame originates, as Becker suggests, in their own unused and repressed life, then the lives of those with an overabundance of aliveness will be sought to be destroyed. Otherwise, their energy would be a persistent accusation, one that would make the repressed suffering unbearable.

The psychologist Wilhelm Reich described this societal hatred of life as “the murder of Christ.” For Reich what made the Biblical savior exceptional was not that he enunciated a new religious message, but that Christ was truly alive. He couldn’t be anything but real. He was real in an ardent, childlike, and instinctive sense. And this, according to Reich, is precisely why he had to die. Reich concludes that the fate of the historical Christ figure resulted inevitably from the hatred called up by his loving aliveness in those who did not dare to risk it themselves. According to Reich, the repression of aliveness in oneself and others was, and is, a repetition of this first murder of Christ, each and every time.

The uncontrolled repetition of this act lies at the basis of our attitude toward the naked chicken of the battery farm; it feeds our indifference toward the marshland that yesterday opened its watery eye to the heavens and today has been drained to become a cornfield.
The reflex to kill a person who attempts to be alive is the same as the mistrust of an animal, of wildness, of our own feelings. It is related to the need to educate and shape a child. A civilization that shuts out death must control life. It tries to annihilate all that is living and that follows its waking emotions, the “five freedoms” of Virginia Satir, “the inner freedom of the animal man which is part of the lawful freedom of the whole creation.” The prohibition of these freedoms, according to Reich, flows out of a single destructive impulse: “You must not ever, under punishment of death, know God as Love.”

The structural hatred of the living lies concealed below our “character armor.” It is controlled by systems of rules that determine who counts as good and high-performing, as useful and worthy of love. Who is cool and hip and belongs to the inner circle of those with a special value. The hatred is well hidden by the persons in power. It is usually concealed as care for what is best and love for the other. The hatred only affects those who deny control and try to live truthfully. Thus, the particular act of malice against life involves more than the unconscious transfer of a person’s own pain, out of the fear of imperfection and of death, onto those others over whom you exercise dominance and control. The true act of malice is no longer feeling the pain and declaring that the acts of hatred motivated by that pain are acts of care and good intention. Hell lies hidden in denial.

We shudder at knowing the extent to which control through self-denial is part of daily life in totalitarian systems. Those who transgressed against Stalinist truths might one day find themselves ushered into a black car at four in the morning by silent men and thrown into prison. But the worst part was that the suspected delinquents had to compose repentant confessions to the party in which they renounced their aliveness and the “five freedoms.” Only after they had betrayed themselves, after they had begun, out of a fear of death, to question the extent to which they might indeed have been guilty of it all, only then would they be shot.

Those who try to defy our dominant system of efficiency are nowadays threatened by a less heroic elimination. Without certificates of achievement and patronage, they simply cannot participate. They are destitute, powerless, shut out, perpetual children. And to everyone else,
they are doubtless “to blame” for their own misery. These anonymous losers are everywhere. We encounter them in the lost ball of feathers that is the shivering sparrow sitting in a shrub in the last bit of village green in winter, we meet them in the small farmers of India who worry about their livelihoods because they refuse to plant patented seeds and can no longer keep pace economically—or who are facing economic ruin because they did plant patented seeds and put themselves hopelessly in debt to do so.

In favor of a pedagogy of permission

Confronting this denial is our most important task, and also our most difficult one, because we must first expose our self-denial. The rest will probably occur automatically, because the waters of life always find their way through open channels. A culture of life begins with speaking of what is and accepting what is. It follows that a culture of life begins, again, with children. For the most important aspect of children is to welcome what is, what claims existence for itself.

Alice Miller frames this as a pedagogy of permission. For her, child-rearing means doing nothing except asserting one’s own boundaries and being an example of what it means to not allow yourself to be used. This form of child-rearing would be to demand nothing. What children need to unfold themselves “is the respect of their care givers, tolerance for their feelings, awareness of their needs and grievances, and authenticity on the part of their parents, whose own freedom—and not pedagogical considerations—sets natural limited for children.”

Children need the “five freedoms,” and they need the infinite trust of others that they will savor those freedoms. They need the confidence that they will be able to be alive. They need their parents’ joy that they are as they are able to be. They need their parents’ wish for them to completely live their own life. In other words, they need nothing less than an ecological culture of love.
NOTES


CHAPTER SIX: A PLAY OF FREEDOM

4. Ibid., 52.
13. Ibid., 104.
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20. Ibid., 159
21. Ibid., 126.
27. Ibid., 39.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: THE THOUGHT OF THE SOUTHERN MIDDAY

4. Ibid., 296.
5. Ibid., 273.
6. Ibid., 255.
7. Ibid., 297.
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