



FREE  
SAMPLE  
CHAPTERS

Praise for  
*How Shall I Stand Between River and Land?*

In this extraordinary book, Leni de Mik illuminates our understanding of resilience and transformation through her moving reflections on surviving trauma and starvation during World War II, the hardships of immigration, her intellectual and spiritual journey, and wisdom gleaned from decades of practice as a clinical psychologist. Her insights and practical guidance for an authentic and meaningful life harmonize beautifully with decades of research on human resilience.

**ANN S. MASTEN** Author of *Ordinary Magic: Resilience in Development*, and Regents Professor Emerita of Child Development at the University of Minnesota

*How Shall I Stand Between River and Land?* symbolizes the delicate balance we seek amidst the chaos of life. In a world that often feels tumultuous and unpredictable, the quest for self-discovery has never been more essential. This book, amidst the fear of war and economic instability, offers a beacon of hope and a roadmap for personal growth and resilience in these troubled times. Each page challenges you to examine not only your own experiences but also your connection to the world around you. This book beautifully illustrates the intricate weaving of our personal journeys into humanity's larger tapestry, thus making you feel connected and part of something bigger. Let the wisdom of your heart guide you on your next adventure and let this book be your companion on the journey of self-discovery.

**SUZIE HOUSLEY** Midwest Book Review

Feeling adrift in an uncertain world? Leni de Mik's *How Shall I Stand Between River and Land?* offers a welcome guide. With wisdom gained from her experience adapting across four cultures, she understands the challenges of change firsthand. Leni helps us find a way to stay true to who we are even when everything around us is shifting. Her stories act as a compass for how to lead with your values and build authentic, trust-based connections. If you're looking for courage, confidence, and balance in our chaotic times, this is a must-read.

**ERIN MEYER** *New York Times* best-selling author of *No Rules Rules* and *The Culture Map*

This book is amazing! It is part memoir, part psychology, part admonition to the reader—there is so much in it! To me, it represents a lifetime of living, experience, and thought. Simply amazing.

**MARILYN J. KAMAN** International judge, United Nations mission in Kosovo

Leni de Mik began her life in the Netherlands where her father accepted the dangers of being a leader in the Resistance to Nazi occupation. Dr. de Mik became a psychologist in the United States. This is a journal of her heart's self-discovery. Maturing is not a process of simply coming to understand the world outside. Rather, it is an awakening, a self-exploration, where one becomes brave enough to grow in empathy and arrive at compassion for broadest sense of our shared humanity. Life stories, this story, must be read with intuition, that is between the lines, to appreciate her heart's wisdom.

**STEVEN MILES, MD** Prof Emeritus of Medicine and Bioethics, University of Minnesota, author of *The Torture Doctors: Human Rights Crimes and the Road to Justice*

As a long-time Buddhist teacher and author, I am happy to say that this is a book that has no “stink of Buddhism” (Leni also has spent years as a Buddhist practitioner) or of any specific religion, which lends to both its value and its deep spirituality. Drawing on her own experience, Leni illustrates the relationship between opening up your heart to a timeless stillness and reaching out and supporting others who are suffering—what the 13th century Zen teacher Dogen called, forgetting the self and acting from a feeling of “intimacy with all life.” Leni serves as a role model for us all in her ability to do this.

**TIM BURKETT** Author of *Nothing Holy About It*, *Zen in the Age of Anxiety*, and *Enlightenment Is an Accident*

Weaving together wisdom, experience, and life stories, Leni de Milk has created a tapestry for living a heart-centered life. Blending practical guidance and thoughtful reflections, *How Shall I Stand Between River & Land?* offers inspiration for those seeking a balance between personal growth and a purposeful relationship with the world around them.

**HELEN DAVIDSON** Blogger and life-story facilitator for older women at [agelesspossibilities.org](http://agelesspossibilities.org)

The world is crying out for wise elders to step forward in these troubling times. Leni de Mik’s new book is a clarion call to return to our hearts in a world gone mad. We all benefit from her 80+ years of experience and wisdom as she chronicles a life of activism in service to life. Read it now!

**PATRICIA AND CRAIG NEAL** Past publisher of *Utne Reader*, and co-founders, Center for Purposeful Leadership, co-authors, *The Art of Convening*

It is a terrible loss to define ourselves as victims of trauma and grieve the collapse of our easy way of life. Leni's book shines with the clear light of wisdom gained from fully living life no matter its harshness. Here, we learn questions and practices to awaken the power of the heart, no longer diminished as victims, people engaging wholeheartedly with life as caring and confident contributors. Thank you Leni.

**MARGARET WHEATLEY** Author of 13 books, from *Leadership and The New Science* to *Restoring Sanity*

How Shall I Stand  
Between River & Land?



How  
Shall  
I Stand  
Between  
River &  
Land?

HEART QUESTIONS FOR  
UNCERTAIN TIMES

Leni de Mik, PhD

With a Foreword  
by Parker J. Palmer



CREATIVE  
COURAGE  
PRESS

Copyright © 2025 Leni de Mik. All rights reserved.

Neither this book nor any part within it may be sold or reproduced in any form without permission. To request reprints, permissions, quantity discounts, and special editions for educational or organizational use, contact the publisher at [hello@creativecouragepress.com](mailto:hello@creativecouragepress.com)

Creative Courage Press, LLC (Palisade, CO)  
[www.CreativeCouragePress.com](http://www.CreativeCouragePress.com)

ISBN 978-1-959921-080 (paperback)  
ISBN 978-1-959921-097 (ebook)

First edition (all formats): 2025

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mik, Leni de, author. | Palmer, Parker J., foreword author.

Title: How shall I stand between river and land? Heart questions for

uncertain times / by Leni de Mik, PhD; with a foreword by Parker J. Palmer.

Description: Includes bibliographical references. | Palisade, CO:

Creative Courage Press, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN: 2025913517 | ISBN: 9781959921080 (print) |

9781959921097 (ebook) Subjects: LCSH Psychologists—United States—

Biography. | Intuition. | Self help. | Self-realization. | Self-actualization

(Psychology) | BISAC SELF-HELP / Motivational & Inspirational |

BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Memoirs | PSYCHOLOGY / Emotions

Classification: LCC BJ1470 .M55 2025 | DDC 158.1—dc23

Cover and interior design: KP Books

Cover painting: Leni de Mik

Editor: Shelly Francis

Proofreader: Rebecca K. Job

Author photo courtesy of author

# Contents

---

Foreword . . .	1
<i>Introduction</i> Questions of Becoming . . .	5
<b>PART I</b> Embracing the Mystery and Complexity of the Heart . . .	15
<i>Chapter 1</i> Your Heart Is Your Greatest Untapped Power . . .	17
<i>Chapter 2</i> Tuning In to the Language of the Heart . . .	35
<i>Chapter 3</i> Recognizing Potholes on the Heart's Journey . . .	51
<b>PART II</b> Reclaiming the Heart, Again and Again . . .	67
<i>Chapter 4</i> To Lose Heart Is to Lose Yourself . . .	69
<i>Chapter 5</i> Reclaiming Grief, Depression, and Loneliness . . .	85
<i>Chapter 6</i> Transforming Anger and Shame . . .	103
<i>Chapter 7</i> Choosing to Risk Our Values . . .	121
<i>Chapter 8</i> Keeping Your Heart Open in Uncertain Times . . .	141
<i>Chapter 9</i> Reclaiming Happiness and Belonging, Resisting Toxic Positivity . . .	161
<i>Chapter 10</i> Choosing Self-Worth and Authenticity . . .	185
<b>PART III</b> Alchemy of an Undivided Heart . . .	201
<i>Chapter 11</i> Connecting Through Non-Dual Compassion . . .	203
<i>Chapter 12</i> Entering the Cave of the Heart . . .	225
<i>Chapter 13</i> If the Heart Could Dream . . .	243
<i>Chapter 14</i> Embodying Your Heart Wisdom . . .	261
<i>Epilogue</i> Joyful Appreciation for a Lovely Friend . . .	273
Gratitudes . . .	277
About the Author . . .	279
About Creative Courage Press . . .	281



# Foreword

Parker J. Palmer

Author of *Let Your Life Speak, A Hidden Wholeness, Healing the Heart of Democracy,*  
and *On the Brink of Everything*

---

THIS BOOK SEEKS to answer an age-old question: Where can we go for guidance, inspiration, and the courage to act wisely, especially in morally challenging times? The question has been with us forever, but rarely has it been more pressing than it is today in the midst of our global calamity.

For Leni de Mik, the answer is clear. Beneath all of life's complexities and confusions lies the wisdom of the heart, that deep core of the human self where all of our faculties for knowing ourselves and the world converge. The heart does not shout at us but speaks softly. It does not issue marching orders but often speaks first as a question that requires us to go inward toward a quiet place where the racket of fear, confusion, and discord are silenced, and we have a chance to listen for an answer. When we have the patience required to follow that question and dwell in that silence, the wisdom of the heart can be heard. The question then becomes, will we follow its lead?

Leni de Mik's wise counsel comes not from the intellect alone but from life experience. Born to Dutch parents in 1941 during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands—another era of global calamity—shaped by her father's role in the Resistance, her emigration to Canada, her decades as a U.S.

citizen, and her work as a clinical psychologist, Leni brings it all together here in a book that is timely, inspirational, and practical.

Using parables, ancient wisdom and modern science, client stories, and her own life experiences, she proposes ways we can foster hope, generate solutions, and weave life-sustaining connections through small, daily opportunities: with a gesture of gratitude, a hand on a shoulder, a word of encouragement, or a smile and a nod. Even when illness or age become confining, we can continue to make a difference. As the poet John Milton wrote, “They also serve, who only stand and wait.”

From her experience in World War II and again during the COVID-19 pandemic, Leni learned that it defies the nature of our interconnected existence to sit by and do nothing, paralyzed by fear, while others are endangered. Now as then, withdrawal, avoidance, and retreat into individualism will not solve the challenges of our times, nor will they sustain our hearts and souls. For Leni, as for her father in the Resistance, it boils down to “heart questions” that must be met with awareness, with answers, with choices, with words and actions and ways of life.

Leni reminds us that we are not powerless. We can choose connection over isolation, seek out and listen to diverse voices and conversations, and build bridges to understanding. We can choose action, support efforts already under way. By taking small steps in shared humanity and on common ground, we can turn fear into resolve, division into collaboration, and uncertainty into a shared journey. Together, we are stronger, more effective, and more resilient than we can ever be alone.

But to be available to others, we must do the inner work necessary to make ourselves available to ourselves. As Leni writes, “When we tend to our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs,

we become better equipped to serve others authentically and sustainably, transforming our individual pursuits into a collective endeavor of caring for all beings.” We must rescue our hearts from all that holds them captive, including the many fears that lead us to “play it safe” and avoid taking risks in service of others. From the deep and rich life experience chronicled in this book, Leni offers many responses to the question, “How shall we follow, fortify, and open our hearts in these uncertain times?”

From childhood onward, Leni de Mik has understood that connection, relationship, and community are the keys to the fullness of human life, the source of shared joy in good times and shared sustenance in hard times. So it is more than incidental that this book—this plea for the kind of inner work that leads us to care for each other and the common good—is itself the direct result of a profound friendship that Leni had with another great soul of our time, a woman whom I too had the privilege of knowing.

Leni met Joyce McFarland some thirty years ago, and Joyce introduced me to Leni about six years ago. As Leni says in an epilogue to this book, Joyce was a “master connector.” It was as if she had been born with an ability to spot human need, to spot the gifts of people who might serve those needs, to encouraging them individually, and when needed, to bring them together in service of the common good.

Born into a family with an instinct for public service and the resources to help, Joyce married Dick McFarland, whose commitment to public service matched her own. Together they formed the McFarland Family Foundation, which to this day continues to serve the great cause of love, truth, and justice.

When Joyce and Leni met, they quickly recognized each other as soul sisters, both of them as deeply devoted to the inner work that grounds us as to the outer work that serves

the world's needs. Joyce was eager to make sure that the larger world had a chance to learn Leni's story and benefit from Leni's wisdom, so when she died in May 2022, Joyce left a bequest in support of this book. Leni, for her part, was equally eager to do the hard work required to honor and keep Joyce's spirit alive with a book that responds to the ancient question, "How, then, shall we live?"

From Aristotle to C.S. Lewis to Rebecca Solnit, from Buddhism to Christianity, friendship has been regarded as one of the keys to living a virtuous life. The book you hold in your hands is the result of the kind of friendship that, multiplied many times over, could save the world.

*Introduction*

# Questions of Becoming

From where I stand I cannot see how the river began  
or when it will fall finally into something else.

*Ziggy Rendler-Bregman, poet and artist*

---

I RECALL ASKING myself a question when I was 10 years old. *What happened the day I was born?* The answer was no surprise. I already knew it but wanted to hear again my mother's quiet response: "I gave birth to you at home; Nazis patrolled the streets. The sky was black with planes, their bellies filled with bombs."

I was in the womb when the Nazi army crossed the border and occupied our small village in the western Netherlands, in the province of South Holland where my family had lived for countless generations. If you look at a map, you can see how close we were to the North Sea and on to England. Also, why we were in the path of bombs coming from Allied places and headed to Germany. I was born in August 1941.

For five years, the village was occupied, and German and British bombers darkened the skies. The Battle of the Bulge and Operation Market Garden were so close we had to evacuate as the front approached. During the war, Holland's economy collapsed. My father's family construction business building roads and dikes was destroyed. In retaliation for assisting the Allies, the Nazis had blocked food supplies to Western Holland in November 1944. We were plunged into famine. It was winter, the coldest winter in Dutch history;

more than 20,000 people in our small province died of starvation as temperatures plummeted into the unholy cold. After the war, the country was in ruins, and Stalin was rising and looming in the East. But we were still behind enemy lines many months after some of Holland was free.

I knew of and was deeply influenced by my father's participation in the Dutch Resistance of World War II. After the war, he served on a town council to reconstruct the village and was responsible for holding villagers accountable for Nazi collaboration. Villagers at that time were publicly acclaimed and censured. Choices had been made. In the terror of being hunted, of death by starvation, some had collaborated. Others, like my father, had resisted and risked their lives in service.

My family and an estimated 8 million other Europeans were part of a fear-filled, hope-filled, post-war exodus. To find a better future, we emigrated. Finding a new home was a kind of lottery. Where you landed depended on which country would accept you. Many who left our village ended up in Brazil or South Africa. By chance, we found a sponsor in Canada. The childhood years of war passed; life went on.

When I was 18, I went to Calvin, a Christian college in Michigan, married an American, and became a U.S. citizen. A few years later, to pursue my then-husband's postdoctoral work in physics, we moved to Munich, once the home and heart of Hitler's regime. In a strange twist of fate, I found myself living with Germans again. This time, we met in peace. It turned out to be a profound gift. This time, I learned about the war and its aftermath from a new perspective, from their lived experience. It was a period of deep reflection and change for me.

Questions have marked my life. “What did you do during the war?” “What will I do when I’m afraid like that? When the risk is high?” Questions about accountability for choices have been with me since childhood—questions like *why am I here?* and *what is my responsibility at this moment?* Questions like this are not new to me; such questions of purpose and meaning have been woven through my life.

Perhaps because of the immediacy of those early questions, I became an activist in our life that followed the war and migration. My questioning never ceased. Questions informed my life choices as I went from being a teacher in Appalachia, an administrator of an Experimental College at the University of Minnesota, a hospice planner, an anti-war protester, a civil and human rights activist, and finally, a clinical psychologist. Along the way, I became a multi-lingual citizen of three countries and a resident of four.

As a clinical psychologist for 40-plus years, I’m familiar with trauma. I have given lectures about surviving adversity, led therapy groups for those with PTSD, and volunteered for disaster relief. I’ve welcomed refugees into my home. Even so, I learned some of the most ground- and gut-level knowledge of life in my first decade, during the years of war, reconstruction, and immigration.

Eighty-plus years later, I recognize the early exposure to hunger, war, and death as doorways. Traces of war remain in my bones, in my DNA, in my patterns of arousal, in the texture of my relationships, and in my heart. Like improbable teachers, they continue to inform and enrich me as I grow older, revealing insights and veiled truths I might never have chosen to know. But I needed to learn the power of

reflection, of asking hard “heart questions” and sitting without answers until they eventually arose within me.

Today, my childhood might receive the label of trauma, but I cringe at the label. Few Europeans I knew as a child characterized it that way. Instead, it was war, the life lived by everyone. Not everyone turns an eye back on their life to unravel its meaning.

Trauma is often seen through a lens that considers its harm, damage, and healing. I’m not sure how that fits for me. If being shielded from grief and pain is good, then so be it. Writers, Hemingway among them, suggest that harrowing experiences hold opportunity, that broken places can knit together in new ways that strengthen us, sharpen our sense of purpose, and enhance our process of finding meaning. Given the choice, I would not exchange my childhood for a childhood of comfort and safety.

As the youngest, I was cared for by protective parents and seven older siblings (who, like a trained chorus, would snatch me up, throw me in a washtub, and run for the bomb shelter when sirens wailed). I now believe it possible that early-life war experience and exposure to danger may have infused me with a “felt sense,” a mixture of uncertainty intertwined with an inner assurance of safety in danger. Perhaps the call to challenging circumstances that I later felt stemmed from a need to prove that I was brave and unafraid.

As an adult, I was curiously drawn to (and subsequently traveled to) places that deterred others—risky places where war, devastation, violence, or authoritarianism was a way of life. Such places attracted and scared me but did not deter me. In later years, my psychologist-trained mind tried to puzzle it out (as did my heart). What inner voice was beckoning? Was I unconsciously drawn to return to an earlier atmosphere of

uncertainty and tension? Was it a call to return, to taste once more of early experiences I did not fully understand?

I think of my childhood as a mix of gifts and wounds. It was a lived experience that instilled an expanded foundation of “knowing.” The exposure to and familiarity with hardship and uncertainty cultivated resilience. I could not have come by these facets of my identity in any other way. They have called me to activism and instilled a desire to serve; they have served me well.

### AND THEN CAME COVID

For many years, I had not thought much about my early days. That changed in 2020 when COVID-19 arrived, along with new questions for my heart.

Like other introverts, I enjoyed life during the pandemic at times. COVID offered a reprieve from small talk and extroverted social responsibilities that can quickly exhaust me. But it also removed the opportunity for the warm exchanges and deep conversations I typically welcome. As time passed, I felt not particularly afraid of the virus itself; I practiced safety, showed up for vaccinations, and faithfully wore masks.

As I saw it, during COVID, as during the war, we lived with a common threat. Some of us were protected and served by essential workers risking their lives and the well-being of their families. Some of us lived in danger of isolation and despair, in fear of compromising the immune system. Some reached out to touch, to be with others. Some withdrew into silos of personal safety. ○

However, I also saw that life seemed desperate for others. When I checked in with friends, online or outside, I felt a charge; I sensed their bodies contracting against a looming specter of imminent danger. And this broad-based fear also

had an impact on me. I slipped through and back in time, found myself suddenly reliving the days of my childhood and harkening to a sometimes-painful flood of memories.

I was not the only one so troubled. As the virus spread and deaths piled up, Nelly, my remaining sibling, who is 10 years older and a widow, called from Michigan. She was in lockdown, and she, too, was now often reliving the past.

Nelly explained how she was glued to the news and having nightmares. To my surprise, her dreams were two-natured. She was responding to COVID media news and pandemic safety restrictions, but even more prominently to deeper, older fears. She explained how she was being triggered by President Trump, for whom she had voted.

This fact astonished me. I listened. My sister described reliving the political tension of the 1930s when Hitler's power was gathering. She expressed her dismay and how she felt alone in her fear. "They don't get it," she said, "They did not live it," referring to her Michigan family and neighbors. I understood. I knew. I felt it as well.

Today, few remain to carry the lived experience of World War II, of life in the direct path of a storm that would cost millions of lives and would spur mass migration. Like my sister, what I remembered from childhood impacted my perception of life during the pandemic.

I toggled between WWII and COVID, remembering how isolation had been checked by the rules of the Geneva Convention and wondering what the resisters of World War II would have done in the circumstances presented by COVID. If isolation was not okay then, could it be all right now? How does history affect our moral compass, choices, and decisions?

I felt the shadow of war; I felt alone. Others did not seem to feel the weight of my perceptual filter. Some would call it trauma or unhealed wounding; it did not feel like a wound.

I think of it as “conditioned attunement,” the legacy of lived experience.

Today, no longer in the extremes of COVID, we are facing the rise of fascism, authoritarian regimes, and an existential threat to democracy not only in the United States but globally. Questions of choice arise every moment as we target care, extending to self, family, community, or all of these. Our moral core, this true north, is present not only in our larger actions. It manifests in the smallest genuine gestures: a gentle touch, a word of encouragement, a helping hand. Big things are made up of small things, and small things cultivate big things. The potency of humble dailiness is at the heart of our democracy.

As my life nears its natural transition, I think about the future of the children about to embark on their journey on our amazing, life-giving planet. I remember how global wars in the past century left an estimated 100 million dead. I feel the tearing of the earth’s fabric, the Anthropocene. I wonder about climate change.

It’s hard not to worry about the children. I remember how hunger and survival drive mass migration. We recently had the first Minnesota winter without winter. There are daily reports of catastrophic weather conditions.

When will we start to beg for water? I won’t be here, but other generations will reap the harvest of our choices. How will they live? How will they survive?

I reflect on these future possibilities, aware of the darkness of my war-shaped view of life—sometimes an uncomfortable, unshared experience. How can you imagine or feel the impact of what you have not experienced?

Questions for our head demand immediate answers, but questions for the heart require more patience. Questions can raise awareness of the choices before us, sharpening the blade of discernment and encouraging the unconscious to become conscious. Practice makes it possible to seek answers from our heart, for our heart. We can then see more clearly where we can choose to reach out or hold back. We know the price and reward of choices more clearly as we decide whether to call a “needy” friend, go for a run, read a book, or visit a neighbor in an assisted living facility. As we make choices, we are transmuted. Each action is revealed as a choice of targeted awareness, care, and expression of what matters at that moment.

As we practice asking heart questions and seeking our truest answers, we come to know ourselves. We learn to be aware of our choices and consequences. We gain direct insight into how we balance our internal hierarchy of values. We might witness what is for us “object, other, or thing” (as religious thinker Martin Buber coined it), and what we designate sacred, “Thou.”

Even today, many suffer from things that we cannot even imagine. Like all things, moral fortitude thrives when cultivated—in part with good questions. There will always be heroes who will lead with unwavering courage and love. We don’t have to be heroes, but we can do small things, be good to each other, and care about the common good.

## RIPPLES OF AWARENESS

When we are completely at ease with our own being,  
the ripples of awareness naturally spread out in all  
directions, touching the lives of everyone we meet.

*Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche*

Many of us can't imagine what it would feel like to be "completely at ease with our own being." Few of us are fully confident about our ability to nurture deep, meaningful, empowering connections with people inside and outside our family and social circles. How can we cultivate the self-awareness necessary for self-compassion, much less compassion for others and finding common ground? This is one of the most important heart questions we must consider today.

We are at a crossroads, divided along economic, social, political, and religious lines; we live in a time where divisions threaten to harden. As we turn on the news, we witness political distrust, mass migrations, extinctions, and war. We experience unusual, disturbing changes in local weather patterns. The future can seem dark, shrouded in uncertainty as we look ahead. Fear and overwhelm can paralyze us. Resistance can seem futile.

As we look for a way forward, we can ask many questions, most without clear, certain answers: How do we move beyond divisions? How shall we respond to these local and global challenges? What can we do, what *must* we do, to be part of the solution, to ensure a safe, sustainable world for future generations, for our kids and grandkids? How can we restore a harmonious, respectful relationship with our planet?

Part One of this book, "Embracing the Mystery and Complexity of the Heart," focuses on the self, the inner life where the heart's journey to wholeness and authenticity begins. It calls attention to the obstacles, challenges, and choices readers will be asked to consider. It suggests provisions that may be needed to sustain the resolution to stay on the heart path. I have walked this path alone and with others. I hope to provide guidance as you navigate the journey's weeds, snags, and pitfalls.

Part Two, “Reclaiming the Heart, Again and Again,” is where our orientation shifts from “me” to “we.” Here, the heart journey begins in earnest. It’s where, over and over, we recognize that our circle of care is too narrow, our sense of belonging too thin, and our social structure too fragile. To reclaim the heart again and again, we must find the courage to stand alone when necessary, the wisdom to connect when possible, and the resolve to take the next step—sometimes alone, sometimes with the support of others.

Part Three, “Alchemy of an Undivided Heart,” is where the small *we*, born of limited compassion, becomes the big *WE*, and we begin to realize what it means to live and act in an interconnected universe. The wisdom of *WE* is not new.

Each chapter ends with heart questions for your own reflection.

Ultimately, this book seeks to answer the question: Where can we go for direction, inspiration, and courage to act wisely? For me, the unfailing source found beneath all superficial, judgmental, fear-based, discriminative discourse is the self-aware wisdom of the heart. This wisdom often begins as a question that draws us inward toward a quiet place where the voices of fear, confusion, and discord are stilled. There, the heart speaks.



PART I

# Embracing the Mystery and Complexity of the Heart

---

We awaken by asking the right questions.

*Suzy Kassem*



*Chapter 1*

# Your Heart Is Your Greatest Untapped Power

The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.

*Blaise Pascal*

---

FOR MOST OF us, the questions that keep us up at night have to do with job security, concern for family, our possessions, how to get what we want or pay for what we have, our status, the size of our paycheck, the promotion we deserve, and the raise that comes with it.

We question decisions we made in the past and what our future may look like. We relive our mistakes over and over. The questions we focus on weigh heavily during our waking hours and haunt our dreams at night.

This is no accident. We've been conditioned since childhood to measure our worth by the responses we receive from our communities. Our self-esteem hangs on how the world sees us.

At times, we drift. Life becomes prescribed, dull, and colorless as we mindlessly become prisoners of our striving. It happens over time, over years of worry, as failures and successes come and go, leaving us numb. We often don't know when it happened or how we became prisoners of routine, automatons moving through the well-trodden ruts of our lives.

And yet, all it can take to shift is one small crack in the armor around our hearts. It might be a heart-stopping phone

call, or that one visit to the doctor's office where a dreaded diagnosis is confirmed, or the day of that abrupt dismissal and termination from a job. Just enough for the thinnest shaft of light to enter and awaken us to the realization that the approval of others and the accumulation of things don't amount to a hill of beans.

Perhaps a tiny crack that allows the light in can remind us that what really matters is our capacity for love and courage, our ability to feel rather than react, and our connection with others as givers and receivers of compassion. This dawning awareness can help us commit to hearing the quiet voice that tells us who we are, opening the door to a well-lived life.

I invite you to ponder the questions that matter, that can make a difference in our lives and maybe even our world. Questions that nurture our inner life and infuse our simplest moments with meaning. These are the questions of an awakening heart, and they are infused with wisdom, courage, and your greatest untapped power.

### **A MOMENT OF AWAKENING ON MY HEART'S PATH**

Growing up, I was no stranger to independence and self-reliance. My childhood after immigration was marked by a double-edged autonomy. Today, it might be called benign neglect. I had learned early on to navigate life's challenges alone, often without guidance. There was no other way. It was unremarkable; it was simply how life was for everyone. But I found an unseen benefit; unsupervised, I could do what I wanted without risk of discovery. My childhood was marked by a quiet rebellion, sometimes a sneaky and secretive defiance against the Dutch values in my home and the limitations imposed on me. I never asked; I just did. Whether it was signing my own report cards or writing notes to my

teachers that my mother signed without knowing what I had written. My individual experiences were lost in the ongoing crisis as each family member tried to find a way to adjust and survive. What I did was rarely shared or acknowledged. I learned not to expect that.

As a child I asked, *Who am I? Why am I here?* I asked myself that frequently, concluding that I was here merely because my parents had decided to have sex. I would just as soon not have been here (today, I would have been diagnosed with early childhood pervasive depression). As a teen, my heart questions became, *Who can I be? Where am I going? What do I want?*

Yet I never gave much thought to college. It was not a familiar topic nor a conversation in the family. In Ontario, school attendance was mandatory until age 16, or grade 12, when there was a set of government exams. (Canada was too poor for publicly funded universities; there were only five in Ontario in the 1950s). I sat for those exams, and my score gave me entry to grade 13 (the equivalent of freshman year in college—university was three years).

When the university door opened, it seemed way beyond my reach—but, perhaps for the first time, I started to think about a personal future. Personal futures were a low family priority. Everyone was still trying to dig themselves out of the financial pit of my mother's health. My sister Betsy was in a mental hospital. The mortgage had to be paid, and whoever could work, worked.

I had luck. I was in a catechism class led by Reverend Van Kooten. For some reason, he saw something in me that perhaps even I did not fully recognize—a potential that deserved to be nurtured. He spoke with my parents when he came for a family spiritual visit, a *huis besoek*. He suggested that my gifts were worth developing. He told them about a Christian college in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Calvin College would be a place where I could be educated without compromising the Calvinist faith they held dear. He encouraged them to let me go, to allow me to be educated and use my brain, to discover a different way to be in the world, and to step out of the working class that immigration had plunged us into. His empathy for me and my parents was life-changing, setting me on a new track that would define the rest of my life.

My parents felt assured that I would not turn into a heathen there. For them, it was something like, “Why not? She will earn her way; she needs to find a path. Let’s do it, let’s let her go!”

My decision to attend Calvin College was fraught with fear and apprehension; it was an opportunity my siblings had not had. I did not yet know that I was smart and thought I did well only because I was an overachiever and worked so hard. Leaving Canada to live in the United States felt like a daunting leap into the unknown. I knew I would be on my own, working to support myself and earning the finances necessary to stay in school. The connections and conveniences we take for granted today simply did not exist; I would not have auto transportation, and the cost of phone calls meant limited communication with my family. The thought of returning home only a few times a year was both liberating and terrifying. Yet, something deeper than fear drove me to take the risk—perhaps it was a longing for independence, a cry for freedom, or even an emerging sense of self-love. I love my family and know they loved me, but it was not hard to leave. The decision to go was a heart choice, a risk worth taking. At almost 18, off I went.

At Calvin College, I encountered ideas and perspectives that shattered the narrow confines of my previous understanding. I studied history, archeology, literature, philosophy, and art history. I was expanding my exposure and

being changed by what I learned. I was on a path of pursuing the true, the good, and the beautiful.

One college class transformed me, this time at the University of Ohio where I finished by undergraduate degree. It was my first philosophy of religion class, where the air was thick with intellectual curiosity. The professor, Dr. Stanley Greon, was a Presbyterian minister whose teachings opened an entirely new world for me. He introduced us to thinkers and concepts I had never imagined: Paul Tillich (a profoundly subtle theologian who put *doubt* at the center of his thought), Martin Buber, Thomas Merton, and even the Dhammapada, a slim Buddhist volume that has remained with me all my life.

It was a revelation.

In that classroom, under Dr. Greon's guidance, I began to see the world through a different lens. Learning became more than just the accumulation of knowledge; it became an ongoing journey of self-discovery. I started to question, to challenge, and to explore uncharted territories of thought. My mind expanded beyond Calvinism, beyond the limitations I had previously accepted.

Dr. Greon's class validated many questions I had but could not discuss with my family. I had been scripted to believe that everything in the Bible was literally accurate. I could respect it as a metaphor, but this made no sense. The difference was an area of no discussion. Since the Bible was divinely inspired, every word in it was accurate. But unlike for others in my family, the Bible didn't answer my questions, and they kept coming. What is true? What do I believe? How do I understand reality? Not only those existential questions, but also: What is freedom? Responsibility? God's purpose? How do I make sense of the war, of death by torture, of my sister suffering in a provincial insane asylum like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? How could I make meaning of my mother's depression, her

loneliness, and what I knew about the torture of people in concentration camps?

These questions were spoken to, and I finally found people asking similar questions. Suddenly, my questions were validated! I breathed more easily. I was no longer alone.

Dr. Greon opened a landscape where I felt hope—a green branch, long dormant, unfurling within me. Suddenly, the boundaries around my understanding dissolved. Ideas I could safely explore swung open to a new way of seeing the world. I felt a validation for my quest! I was in heaven.

Dr. Greon's philosophy class was a turning point. It awakened in me an awareness that transformed my understanding of the world and my place in it. He made a crucial distinction between cultural mores and moral beliefs, a difference that rippled out into my life and later served me well as a clinical psychologist. This distinction clarified the chaos in my mind and allowed me to align my deepest feelings with a newfound sense of resolve in my heart.

The journey was risky. In my community, obedience to tradition trumped questioning. I held my silence, unwilling to face the resistance and rejection I anticipated would arise if I dared to speak. It solidified a pattern of privacy, of keeping what I believe to myself. But the seeds of change had been planted, and there was no turning back.

Thanks to Dr. Greon, I found a path—a road that led me away from the darkness of spiritual disillusionment and into the light of intellectual and spiritual exploration. He opened doors I never knew existed and gave me the courage to walk through them. It was like T.S. Eliot's description of being "pierced by joy," a profound glimpse of something greater than myself, something that would guide me for the rest of my life.

This is one moment / But know that another /  
shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy.

*T.S. Eliot*

## **AN AWAKENING HEART IS A RESPONSIVE HEART**

The heart is intricately connected to our emotional state. When we experience joy, compassion, or empathy, our hearts beat harmoniously, fostering a sense of calm and contentment. The experience of stress, anger, and negative emotions can disrupt this rhythm, evidencing the interplay between our emotional well-being and the heart's physical health.

Deeper still, the heart is central to intuitive intelligence. Recent scientific research suggests that the heart contains a complex network of neurons similar to the brain's. This network allows the heart to process information and communicate with the brain in ways previously unrecognized. That means the heart may profoundly influence decision-making, problem-solving, and overall cognitive function.

Moreover, heart-centered emotions enhance the brain's ability to regulate bodily functions. For example, you can improve your immune system by conjuring positive emotions, whereas negative emotions can wreak havoc on the nervous system and body.

While science tells us that emotions impact our bodies, we aren't always conscious of their impact; it takes awareness. If aware, we can experience the relationship between heart-based feelings and our physical well-being. We might find that gratitude provides better sleep, improves mood, and boosts our immune system. Compassion leads to better mental outcomes; kindness increases a sense of belonging and reduction of social isolation. The heart's capacity for empathy, to understand the experiences and emotions

of others, provides the underlying bond of connectedness we experience in relationships. Heart choices allow us to live authentic lives, to reach out to others from the center of our being, and to forge our place in the web of human communities.

And yet, questions remain. Do we all feel the same feelings? Do some feelings come into maturity as we mature? Do we *grow into* gratitude, kindness, empathy, connectedness, and belonging? Are they amplified or subdued by our environment? Gratitude, kindness, etc. are all great, but life demands more. It takes asking, “What is true for me? What values do I live by?” And answering those questions takes courage.

## FIND YOUR HEART, FIND YOUR COURAGE

Courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can't practice any other virtue consistently.

*Maya Angelou*

Have you ever felt stuck, perhaps in a life that wasn't the one you dreamed of? On the path of self-discovery, getting stuck is par for the course. *Stuck* in a place of significant discomfort, where the status quo clings to us like glue; where our heart yearns for change, but we feel immovable. When we're stopped in our tracks and can't take another step or even see beyond our feet, that is often the birthplace of transformational change.

Getting unstuck is not an external endeavor; it's an internal one. It demands a deep excavation, an unearthing of our fears, and a confrontation with our resistance. Rumi tells us, “The cure for the pain is in the pain.” This paradoxical

wisdom underscores the importance of turning inward to find the courage required for transformation.

Getting unstuck often begins with recognizing that fear is our most formidable adversary. Fear can paralyze, hold us hostage to the familiar, and prevent us from embracing change. It can convince us that the risks of change outweigh the rewards. Fear can tell us we are not responsible for being stuck, a victim without agency to create change in our lives.

Heart wisdom knows otherwise: it sees how denying our authentic selves the opportunity to flourish is the greatest risk!

It takes courage to take that impossible first step, face our fears head-on, acknowledge them without judgment, harness our energy for growth, and break free—but how do we do it? Where will this courage come from?

The path to courage is the inner path of self-awareness. This path calls for self-compassion, an often-overlooked aspect of personal transformation. We must summon the same caring compassion for ourselves as we would for a close friend. We must recognize that we are not alone in humanity's struggles and that we share the common human condition of fear and vulnerability.

The inner path to awareness and courage is a path of self-discovery. On this inward journey, we revisit old stories and review the narratives we live by. We find installed stories, often born of culture, family narratives, and early life experiences. We see how they create patterns that repeat. Awakened awareness provides new views, allowing us to retain, revise, refresh, update, and enrich ourselves with newfound wisdom and understanding. A road to new possibilities greets us as we take the first steps.

At times, we dare to go deeper. Now, we find the courage and self-esteem to face our inner vulnerability, as when I risked leaving my family in Canada to attend college in the

United States. At daring times like this, we uncover another layer of our true selves: not only the good but also the bad. Not only the altruistic but also the selfish, the responsible as well as the irresponsible. Here, we begin to discover and create a means for genuine, authentic self-acceptance of who we are, *just as we are*. We find a new capacity to hold the tension of opposites to shift out of primitive dualities: good or bad, success or failure, adequate or inadequate, loving or mean, kind or unkind. We replace “either-or” dualities with “both-and” and self-acceptance. Resilience strengthens us as we claim ourselves. Unconditional acceptance of and compassion for who we are becomes the foundation for responsibility and accountability.

Both stuck and unstuck lose their grasp as we recognize that, like all things, we are beings shaped in an ongoing process of formation and transformation, ever-evolving and changing.

### FIND YOUR HEART, FIND YOUR WISDOM

Traditional wisdom relies on reason, analysis, structured thought processes, and adherence to established principles. Our accumulated knowledge and established cultural, religious, and philosophical systems often shape it, and conclusions and guidance are passed down through generations. Today, much of what we consider true (and wise) is derived from science. As a clinical psychologist, I was trained in the scientific method. I respect and value evidence-based information and critical thinking. I respect scientific openness to advancement and change in how we know. But like experienced carpenters, we need informed tool chests: diverse and different tools for different tasks. Scientific reasoning is insufficient for some things. It cannot access the subtle

world below what can be materially measured. This is the realm of heart wisdom.

Heart wisdom requires a worldview not created or solely limited by conditioned beliefs, cultural values, or thought processes from generations past. The heart intuitively understands that we live in the “now” of time, a thoroughly interconnected universe where everything is the cause of everything else, and everything is the effect of everything else. That means we are at times more limited by the world we don’t see than by the one we see.

What we don’t see, don’t think, don’t feel, don’t believe, and don’t know defines our worldview by omission. Our worldview shapes our life and our moment-to-moment experience of being alive. It defines the contours of our happiness and our sadness. It colors every thought we think, and flavors every emotion that arises within us. Our worldview tells us who we may befriend and who we may not. It blinds us to our weaknesses and gives shape to our fear.

Our worldview is like a cup we pour ourselves into. It contains us, shapes us; we feel safe, stable, unchanging, even permanent—so long as the cup is upright, with no cracks, and rests on a level, unmovable surface. But life isn’t like that.

What new thoughts might infuse the mind if the cup containing us suddenly shattered and spilled us out into the world? How might the view change if the transcendent emotions of awe, gratitude, and unconditional compassion suddenly began to flood awareness? Can you imagine being so open and unhindered that the energies of aliveness flowed through like the tides, bringing sensations, emotions, and ideas that simultaneously felt strange and familiar?

Might we experience fear and courage at the same time? If all the pathways within suddenly opened up, might it be possible to feel sadness and joy simultaneously? Could we hold the world’s weight on our shoulders and simultaneously feel

the lightness of just being? Or experience deep grief over the loss of a loved one, and at the same time, grateful for having known them at all?

These are not linear questions that can be figured out with the brain; they are not meant to be puzzles for the intellect. The intellect's skill is superior, unmatched in studying the world we think of as "it," the world of constructs, things, and objects. Heart questions are not static things; they are meant to be lived. Heart questions are invitations to explore the depths of our emotions, values, and purpose, to expand our connection to consciousness. They include a world beyond the one we see. Heart questions open the doorway to something I referred to earlier, what Buber calls the sacred connection, the "Thou" in us, each other, in life itself (for more on this concept, see chapter 6).

Heart questions arise and unfold in their own way and time. Our part is cultivating the capacity and willingness to hold a heart question without seeking the answer—to trust that the questions will open our minds to the mysteries and paradoxes of an expanded consciousness.

Heart questions direct us inward, guiding us along a journey of self-discovery and inner truth. The heart is the dwelling place of our deepest insights and innermost passions. When we're attuned to the heart's questions, we resonate with the world around us, with humanity.

We know this; we recognize the truth of it.

Even so, over and over, we get reeled back in like a fish on a hook by a culture that celebrates the intellect over the quiet wisdom of the heart, prioritizes logic over intuition, analysis over empathy, and too often leaves the heart overshadowed and underestimated. We need both. Both serve us. When the heart and reason come together as "heart-mind," we live in a knowing and understanding of life as a harmonious whole.

## FIND YOUR HEART, FIND YOUR POWER

Our heart is what today might be called our “superpower,” capable of love, compassion, and resilience. It can be a driving force for the common good. One of the most empowering aspects of the human heart is its capacity for love.

Love is not merely a fleeting emotion; it is a force. Love is like the force and flow of a river; it has been poetically described as a river that carries us, a river that we decide to step away from at our peril. Love can transform lives and shape the course of history. Love—whether it’s love for family, friends, or strangers, for non-human animals, nature, art, or all creation—all love has the power to heal, inspire, and unite. Fiercely vulnerable, love motivates acts of kindness, selflessness, and empathy. Leading with our heart empowers us to forge deep connections with others, nature, and the world beyond our immediate experience.

Self-love (sometimes confused with arrogance, self-absorption, and narcissism) is an often-overlooked aspect of the heart’s power. Self-love is essential for personal growth and well-being. When we love and accept ourselves, we become more resilient in the face of adversity, better equipped to navigate life’s complexities, and more capable of pursuing our dreams.

History is filled with examples of individuals who, led by their hearts, have sparked movements for justice, equality, and peace. From Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance to Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat, from Alexei Navalny’s return to Russia knowing he’d die to Senator Cory Booker’s 25-hour oration, these individuals harnessed the power of their hearts to challenge injustice and inspire transformative change.

The heart’s superpower lies not only in its individual potential but also in its ability to connect with and influence

the hearts of others. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, it can create a ripple effect, spread outward, and empower everyone in its wake.

## HEART CHOICES

As we live, the heart is tested. Life brings choices. Heart choices reveal what really matters on an everyday level. Heart choices can be deceptively simple: Will I give up a favorite program or pastime to help a friend or to visit someone in isolation? Will I stay or go?

As a clinician, I often sat with people stuck in a marriage, a job, or a relationship dilemma. Usually, these circumstances require making a heart (and hard) choice. The choice frequently comes with questions: What if I make the wrong choice? What if I live to regret it? How do I know what is the best option?

The answer is often a leap of faith: Do your best, draw on your resources, and risk the unknown. Some of us eventually decide the unknown is preferable to the known. The poet John O'Donohue told of learning “to find ease in risk.”<sup>1</sup> But where do we find such ease?

While some heart choices are seemingly insignificant, others, like “Sophie’s choice,”<sup>2</sup> bring heartache beyond comprehension. Choices define us. Under duress, in times of risk and danger, we discover what deeply matters to us: it reveals

---

1 John O'Donohue, “For a New Beginning,” in *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 14.

2 *Sophie's Choice* is a novel (later adapted to film) by William Styron about a Polish-Catholic survivor of the German Holocaust. The character, Sophie, was forced to choose which of her two children would die by gassing at a Nazi concentration camp. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's\\_Choice\\_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie's_Choice_(novel))

for whom and for what purpose we will leave our zones and risk our safety and comfort. Choices lay bare for whom we feel we have “skin in the game,” for whom we feel committed enough to sacrifice time and commit our resources. For whom, in extreme times, we will die. We’ll revisit this topic of heart choices later.

### QUESTIONS THAT MATTER

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched— they must be felt with the heart.

*Helen Keller*

Questions that matter—heart questions—are not meant to be answered hastily or with preconceived notions. These questions are guides and companions on our journey of self-discovery, encouraging us to enter a dialogue with our deepest selves and listen to our hearts’ whispers.

These questions are inquiries that tug at our heartstrings, stirring up emotions and unearthing truths that may have remained concealed in the hustle and bustle of our lives. They can unravel layers of our experiences, revealing the roots of our self-esteem, self-worth, relationships, and sense of self. Questions, and our answers to them, form the core of our inner identities.

Questions that matter force us to confront our internalized narratives and the critical self-talk that often dominates our inner dialogue. They encourage us to challenge societal norms, explore our own stories, and rewrite scripts that no longer align with who we aspire to be.

Engaging with questions that matter is a journey into vulnerability. These questions peel back the layers of

protection we've built around our hearts; they challenge us to be fully present to the triggers of our emotions. They lead us to even more profound questions that explore the depths of our being. Heart questions and answers humble us. In humility, we find the path to wholeness and authenticity.

Questions that matter empower us to bridge the gap between our inner lives and outer actions, guide us toward more purposeful and meaningful endeavors, and ultimately help us live in greater harmony with our authentic selves.

Throughout the book, you'll be offered opportunities to engage personally with the ideas presented. At times, heart questions arise as simple questions prompting us to choose wisely. Other times, the heart speaks to us through meditation or when immersed in nature.

Feel free to adapt the questions or create your own heart practice. Whatever means you choose, the purpose is cultivating a direct relationship with the heart.

Ask the questions with as much sincerity as you can muster. Write them down. Spend some time every day contemplating the questions without going into your head looking for the answers. Just be open to receiving answers from your heart.

It may take days or even weeks for some clarity to emerge. It may take patience to learn to trust that our inner wisdom will provide guidance, motivation, and courage to live our best lives.

Many of us view questioning as a tactic to slow or defer action. When I think about the role of questions, however, I can't help but see the word "quest."

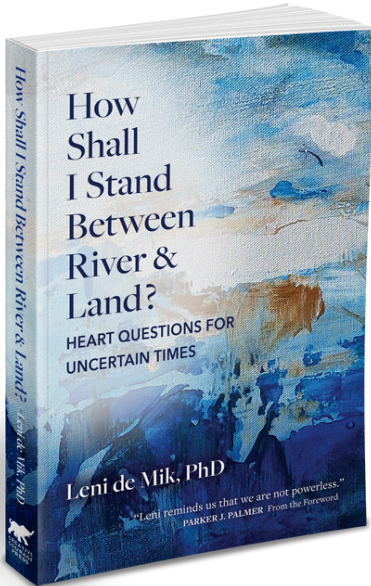
*Christopher L. Kukk*



## Heart Questions

1. What goals did you hold at different points in your life? Were they your goals or what others expected from you?
2. What are your dreams?
3. What fears are you not facing? When is a time you had trust in life to take risks?

# IN A WORLD WITHOUT EASY ANSWERS, BEGIN WITH HEARTFELT QUESTIONS



Leni de Mik offers a rare historical perspective shaped by witnessing her father's courage in the Dutch Resistance in WWII and her own path of migration and renewal. "Between river and land" (*tussen rivier en landt*) was her father's oft-used shorthand that puzzled Leni for years. As her story unfolds, so too will your own understanding of the many facets of wisdom within that Zen kōan of a question.



In a world that often feels tumultuous and unpredictable, the quest for self-discovery has never been more essential. This book, amidst the fear of war and economic instability, offers a beacon of hope and a roadmap for personal growth and resilience in these troubled times. ~ **Midwest Book Review**, Suzie Housley

**Thank you for reading this sample chapter.** You're welcome to share it!  
Order the book today from your favorite bookseller. Please post an honest review later.

 Bookshop.org

 BARNES & NOBLE

 amazon.com

 booktopia

 Apple iBooks

 amazon  
Canada

 Indigo

 Waterstones

 amazon kindle

 goodreads

 Ask your local  
LIBRARY to order  
this book



Learn more about this book and author at <https://bit.ly/LdMbk25>  
Contact us for indie bookstore sales & special orders for organizational use.  
hello@creativecouragepress.com | (970) 812-3224