DECISION

Know that I know nothing. I am searching, just like you.

It was New Year's Eve morning, 2020. Outside, the sun was just beginning to rise, and I was sitting in front of my computer with an ache in my heart that I could no longer ignore. Not heartache in the medical sense. I would get more than enough of that later. It was that other kind of ache, the one that develops when you have been watching something, feeling something, carrying it around with you for a long time, until one day you realize you can no longer push it aside. So I began to write. I had no plan for a book, no structure, no table of contents, and no message I felt compelled to deliver to humanity. To be honest, I did not even know exactly what I was going to write about. I simply opened a blank page and began typing words into it. Something had to come out.

For some time, I had been feeling increasingly alienated from the world I was living in. Perhaps the world had changed. Perhaps I had too. Probably both. I watched my friends, acquaintances, clients, people at work and people I passed in the street, and more and more often I had the feeling that we were all busy building little fortresses around ourselves. My opinion, my needs, my truth, my rights, my life. I certainly could not exclude myself from this. I too had built a fairly solid fortress and had become exceptionally good at defending its walls.

At the same time, materially speaking, we were probably one of the richest generations ever to have lived on this planet. Our refrigerators were full, our cars comfortable, airplanes carried us to the other side of the world within hours, and if we became bored at three in the morning, we could scroll with our thumbs through more human faces than our great-grandparents had seen in their entire lives. By all logic, we should have been doing wonderfully. And yet I increasingly felt that something was missing. Compassion, perhaps. Or closeness. Maybe simply the ability to remain with another human being for a few minutes without immediately ending up back at ourselves.

I remembered times when someone could say, "I have a problem," and another person would simply listen first. Today it often seemed to me that after thirty seconds the accounting had already begun. "You have a problem? I have one too." Or worse: "You have a problem? Then apparently you must have done something wrong." Perhaps I was idealizing the past. People have a tendency to place a warm filter over the years of their youth, rather like old photographs in which even an ugly parking lot suddenly looks romantic. I do not want to turn this into some grand social theory. I only know that something about it made me sad.

And as I wrote about it, I gradually began to notice that my real question was not about the world at all. It was about me. I had spent many years of my life meditating. I had met a spiritual master. I had undergone experiences that had completely shattered my idea of what a human being was. I had read, searched, meditated, loved, argued, worked, begun relationships and ended them, all the while

understanding myself as someone who looked inward. And still, a single wrong sentence from another person could be enough to bring my entire inner monkey circus onto the stage within seconds. That was slightly sobering. Decades of meditation, and some idiot in traffic could still reduce my entire spiritual level to roughly three centimetres simply by changing lanes without indicating.

Perhaps that was exactly the point. I began asking myself what spirituality actually meant to me. Not as a word. We had enough of those. Spirituality was everywhere by then. Yoga, meditation, healing, consciousness, energy, chakras, manifestation, self-love and ten thousand other terms were being pushed through our digital world like products through some gigantic shopping mall. Something else interested me: What happens to me when I can no longer explain to anyone who I am? What remains when I stop referring to my work, my relationships, my experiences and my stories? And what happens when there is no one left to tell me where I am supposed to go? Perhaps that was where my real search lay. Not in a method, not in a philosophy, not even in a master, but in that strange space where, eventually, I am alone with myself. Not lonely. Alone.

The older I became, the more important that distinction seemed to me. We come into this world alone. And at some point our lives also end as a deeply personal experience. People can accompany us. They can hold our hand, love us, comfort us, support us and laugh with us. For that I am infinitely grateful. But certain steps cannot be taken for us. No one can feel for me, no one can love for me, no one can meditate for me, and no one can look for me.

That part of the path I walk alone.

This is where the real subject of this book began: courage. By courage, I do not mean heroism. I am not talking about jumping out of airplanes, climbing mountains, or explaining to a muscular drunk in a bar that his opinion is remarkably stupid. All of those things may require courage, although sometimes they simply require a lack of common sense. What interests me is a quieter form. The courage to look at something inside myself that I do not want to see. The courage not to know an answer. The courage to be wrong. The courage to let go of an idea I have about myself when life shows me that it is not true. And above all, the courage not to know in advance where an inner journey is supposed to lead.

That last point would become far more important to me than I could possibly have imagined on that New Year’s Eve morning. I had become remarkably good at searching for the unknown while simultaneously holding some fairly precise ideas about what that unknown ought to look like. It is an interesting trick of the mind. You can consider yourself completely open and still secretly stand at the door like a bad-tempered security guard. “You’re the Unknown?” “Yes.” “You don’t look like it.” “What am I supposed to look like?” “Well... more unknown.” Door closed. At the time, I had no idea that I would carry this mechanism around with me for almost thirty-five years.

Life had taught me early on that things do not necessarily happen in the order I consider reasonable. A house burned down. People disappeared. Others appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Relationships began and ended. Sometimes a door opened in meditation when I had not even known there was a door there. Then, for years, apparently nothing happened at all. A did not reliably lead to B, and B apparently felt under no obligation whatsoever to produce C afterward. My mind found this deeply unprofessional. I wanted connections. Why is this happening to me? What am I supposed to learn from it? Where is this leading? What is the next step? You probably know these questions. I asked them constantly.

Today I sometimes wonder whether we create a large part of our suffering precisely by demanding that life reveal its plot beforehand. We want to read the synopsis before the movie begins. I certainly did. And life apparently had no intention whatsoever of handing it to me. Looking back, I can see long stretches during which I was living right in the middle of something whose meaning I would only recognize twenty or thirty years later. And perhaps even that meaning exists only because today I draw lines between events that had no connection whatsoever at the time. Perhaps I am discovering an

order. Or inventing one. Both are possible. One thing is certain: I could never have designed my own path like this. No reasonable person would have. The author would have been fired after the first three chapters. “Too many plotlines. No clear dramatic structure. The protagonist learns absolutely nothing.” And yet it continued.

That was where my understanding of trust began. Not in the belief that everything will turn out well. I do not believe that. People become ill. Relationships fall apart. We lose people we love. Sometimes we make the right decision and still get a terrible result. Sometimes we do something exceptionally stupid and, astonishingly, walk away unharmed. For me, trust therefore does not mean that some cosmic insurance agent guarantees that everything will ultimately be settled in my favour. It means something much simpler: to keep walking even when I cannot see the path.

Not knowing, and walking anyway.

Perhaps that is courage. So in this book, I do not want to tell you how you should live. I have enough difficulty understanding my own life. I want to tell you what happened to me. That is all. I will tell you about a burning house and a father I loved and did not understand for a long time. About an Indian mystic I had never searched for and who nevertheless became one of the most important figures in my life. I will tell you about meditation, and about an experience at twenty-eight that came so completely unexpectedly that I did not even have words for it. About a woman I loved, and other women where the result became somewhat more complicated.

I will tell you about pulmonary embolisms, about a black hole in my belly, about narcissism, or at least what I understood by it at the time, about pain, submission, women’s underwear and a black dog collar with silver spikes. And eventually about a large light-blue teddy bear named Tim, who looked like a Buddha made of plush and turned out to be a surprisingly useful therapist. I will write about creativity, about gurus, about a squeaking plastic dildo that once represented part of my mind, about years in which nothing happened and precisely that nothing began driving me insane. About a time when I gave up my search and almost gave up myself along with it. And finally about a tumour that one day began growing in my face, making everything outwardly more threatening while inwardly something entirely different was happening.

Today, all of this belongs together for me. Back then, it did not. And that is precisely why memory is such a strange thing. We look at our former lives with eyes we did not yet possess at the time. The man writing these lines knows things about the eighteen-year-old that the boy could not possibly have known. And the twenty-eight-year-old was utterly convinced of things that make me smile today. I do not consider that a problem. Quite the opposite. It would be far more disturbing if, after forty years, I were still exactly the same person with exactly the same answers.

Part of this book is therefore about my mistakes. About the things I believed to be true. About projections. About expectations. And about the astonishing talent of my mind for turning an experience into a truth and then placing that truth in front of the next experience. There are certain questions, including what may lie beyond our ordinary lives, about which I deliberately do not want to say anything here. Not because these questions are unimportant to me. Quite the opposite. But this book is not meant to be an account of that. It is meant to be about what happens to a human being while he is here: how he loves, how he suffers, how he loses his way, how he lies to himself, how sometimes he catches a brief glimpse of something that seems larger than the person he believes himself to be, and how afterward he goes shopping again and gets annoyed because the wrong kind of yoghurt is on the shelf.

For me, these two levels belong together. I have never understood why spirituality so often makes people solemn. Perhaps it is because, in this particular area, we like to feel especially important. When speaking about consciousness, enlightenment or the universe, a serious facial expression somehow seems appropriate. By now I have seen enough serious-looking spiritual people. Some looked as

though they had been suffering from severe constipation since their previous incarnation. That cannot possibly be the goal. My own life has been far too absurd to turn it into a sacred story.

And precisely that absurdity is part of what I want to show you. I was not a particularly consistent seeker. I was not an ascetic. I was not a man who abandoned his worldly ambitions and then spent forty years sitting silently on a mountain. I wanted success. I loved beautiful women. I loved cars. I loved art. I wanted to make money. I was ambitious. I was jealous. I was generous and selfish, courageous and cowardly, sometimes clear and sometimes so completely blind that, looking back, it is difficult to understand how I managed to find my shoes in the morning. And at the same time, there was always this other movement. Inward. Sometimes strong, sometimes almost gone.

This thread. I could feel it in painting long before I knew meditation. Later, in the presence of my master. Sometimes in nature. Sometimes in love. Occasionally even in the middle of a catastrophe. Something in me knew that the visible surface of my life was not everything. I do not want to define what that something is. The moment I define it, I have built another little box. And this book is partly about how many years it took me to realize that even my most beautiful boxes were still boxes.

At twenty-eight, something happened that changed everything. Afterward, I knew that certain doors existed. And perhaps that was where the problem later began. Because once you have seen one door, you begin looking for that same door again. You forget that a house may have a thousand other entrances.

I believed I was waiting for the unknown. In reality, I was waiting for the repetition of something I already knew.

That was an uncomfortable realization. But an important one. Perhaps that is the deeper story of this book. Not how I found something, but how what I found later became an obstacle itself, and how long it took me to notice.

On that New Year's Eve morning in 2020, I knew none of this. I simply wrote, hour after hour. Eventually full daylight had arrived outside. The sun stood above the houses, the coffee had gone cold, and several pages lay in front of me that looked nothing like anything I might have planned. The ache in my heart had not disappeared. But it had found a direction. Perhaps I did not want to write a book about spirituality at all. Perhaps I wanted to find out how I had arrived here.

How a boy from the Black Forest who wanted to become a painter became a man who followed an Indian master, worked in international advertising agencies, founded companies, almost died twice from pulmonary embolisms, later allowed a dominatrix to send him assignments, sat at his computer with a pink baby bottle, and throughout all of it remained completely serious about trying to discover what meditation actually was. At least that was a story. And above all, it was mine. I did not have to clean it up. I did not have to make myself look better in it.

Perhaps that was the decision I made that morning. Not the decision to write a book, but something simpler. I would look. Even where I felt ashamed, where I made a fool of myself, or where my memory did not match the man I liked to think I was. And I would try not to decide beforehand what I was supposed to find.

That was my decision.

Not to become braver, not to become more spiritual, and not to become better. Only to look deeper. I cannot tell you where your own search will lead. Perhaps you should not search at all. Your search itself might be the obstacle. Life may surprise you in a way for which you do not yet have a name. I do not know, and by now I like that sentence. Once, not knowing felt like a deficiency. Today, sometimes it feels like an open door. Something genuinely new can only appear there, not in the space where I have already decided what is supposed to happen, but where, for a moment, I stand empty-handed.

No map, no certainty, only this strange fact that I am here and that life is not finished with me yet. “Know that I know nothing.” It is not a particularly impressive starting point. For my story, it is the only right one.

Ah, This!

I know nothing about your beliefs. Perhaps you believe in God, or in science, in both, or in neither. Perhaps over the course of your life you have built yourself a fairly stable worldview and are satisfied with it. Or perhaps you are one of those people who wake up in the morning with one new question and go to bed in the evening with three more. By now, it seems to me that it does not matter very much. I myself have collected and lost enough convictions to have become cautious about them. Religion, philosophy, psychology, meditation, spirituality, science, masters, teachers, my own experiences. At some point you find yourself standing in front of a rather large shelf full of explanations and realize that life itself carries on completely unimpressed.

When I sit outside on my veranda at night, this entire collection sometimes begins to seem a little ridiculous. Above me is the sky, usually clear, sometimes full of clouds, and beyond it this universe whose size my mind stops being able to comprehend after only a few seconds. At the same time, a few metres away from me, some tiny shoot is growing through a crack in the concrete of my parking area. Of course I can read about how plants grow. Photosynthesis. Cell division. Water transport. Genes. I can have someone explain to me how stars are formed, how far away they are and how old their light is. That is fascinating and valuable. And still, something remains. Why is there anything at all? Why this universe? Why this little green shoot? Why am I, of all people, sitting here looking at it? Whenever I reach that point, my mind usually becomes slightly nervous. It wants an answer. That is its job.

Perhaps this is exactly why not knowing is so difficult for us to bear. We grew up surrounded by explanations. As children we ask, “Why?” and some adult provides an answer. Later, religion, school, university, books, YouTube and now artificial intelligence take over the service. For almost anything, an explanation exists within seconds. That feels wonderful until you ask a question for which no answer is really enough. Then this gap appears. I know it well. I used to experience it almost like a black hole, something unpleasant that had to be filled as quickly as possible. If I did not know, I had to know. If I had no explanation, I had to find one. Religion is excellent for that. Science too, if you use it for things it was never meant to answer. Spirituality can perform exactly the same job. The mind is not particularly choosy. As long as the hole gets filled.

Perhaps that also explains why the word “spiritual” has enjoyed such an extraordinary career. It fits almost anything. Yoga is spiritual. Meditation is spiritual. A crystal can be spiritual. A trip to Bali, naturally, can be spiritual too. You can have spiritual relationships, spiritual massages, spiritual business, and by now probably even a spiritual nutrition plan for your dog. I make fun of it, but I was part of that same world and probably still am. Only the label interests me less.

One morning, I searched on my computer for a definition of spirituality. Google immediately supplied

one, of course: connection to something greater than ourselves, a search for meaning, a universal human experience. A perfectly reasonable answer. And at the same time it made me aggressive. Not because it was wrong. That may have been exactly the problem. It was so correct, so balanced and so useful that in the end nothing in it was alive anymore. A billion ideas about spirituality thrown into one enormous digital blender and processed into flavourless informational mush. Thank you, Google. Very helpful. And yet I still sit on my veranda at night with absolutely no idea what that damned little shoot is actually doing here.

These days, that comforts me. It used to disturb me. There has been a change in that: I no longer have to close every gap. Sometimes it is enough simply to see it. We humans talk an astonishing amount about things that are probably larger than our ability to talk about them. God. Existence. Oneness. Consciousness. Soul. Karma. Enlightenment. We give them names, develop systems and build explanations around them. Perhaps that is unavoidable. That is how language works. But a name is not the thing itself. If I repeat the word “water” a hundred times, I will not become any less thirsty. Perhaps something similar sometimes happens with spirituality. We talk about it for so long that we forget to look.

When I get up from my veranda at night, turn off my computer and do nothing for a few moments, sometimes another space appears. I close my eyes, breathe in and out, hear a bird even though it has long been dark. Somewhere a car passes. A dog barks. The wind moves the leaves. Nothing special, and precisely there, something is special. For a moment, the need to name all of it disappears. You know that moment when you look across the sea, when you love someone and for a few seconds have forgotten which one of you was actually right, when you look at your child, or when you stand in the middle of a landscape where suddenly nobody needs to explain why it is beautiful.

For me, it feels like a connection then. A thread. Not visible and not particularly spectacular. I could not photograph it, I could not prove it, and I have no desire to turn it into a theory. But I know it. It has appeared again and again throughout my life. Sometimes I lost sight of it for years. Work, relationships, ambition, worries, wounds, and the impressive amount of nonsense with which a human mind can occupy itself covered it over. Then there were moments when it appeared again, not as an answer, more as a reminder that there is something there. Even that sentence is already too much, because the moment I say “something,” I have given the unknown a form.

Perhaps that is precisely why, at some point, I came to like this simple English word: “This.” Not God, not Universe, not cosmic consciousness, not Source, and not some particularly awe-inspiring Sanskrit term that I could later explain to my friends. Simply This. This here. Whatever this is. Could you agree to call it that for a moment? Not as a new definition. Please, no. We do not need a new religion with a huge golden THIS above the entrance. Just as a placeholder, a small word that remains open enough. Perhaps This is simply the name for whatever remains when, for a moment, I stop trying to explain it.

I can sometimes feel This when I am completely absorbed in something. In nature, in creativity, in love, in meditation, and surprisingly, also in the middle of crises, when suddenly everything unimportant falls away and life becomes utterly immediate for a few seconds. Then there is nothing to solve, no grand philosophy, only this moment. Ah, This. It sounds ridiculously simple. That is precisely why I like it, because much of what I made complicated on my spiritual journey was probably never complicated in the first place. My mind made it complicated because complexity gives it work: a goal, a method, progress, an identity. “I am on the path.” Very nice. Where to?

For decades I would have had some answer to that question. Awakening. Enlightenment. Freedom. Awareness. Self-realization. Today I am more cautious with such answers. Not because I believe those words mean nothing. Some of them mean a great deal to me. But a spiritual idea can become just as much of a cage as any other idea, sometimes even more easily because the cage looks so beautiful. We decorate it with Buddha statues and incense sticks and fail to notice that the door is open.

What interests me more today is this immediate experience before my mind turns it into a story. If I see a tree, I can see a tree. If I am sad, I can be sad. If I am afraid, fear can be there. Perhaps not every experience has to be repaired immediately. And perhaps I do not have to keep repairing myself either. For a long time, that was a fairly radical idea for me. We live in a culture of improvement: a better body, better income, better relationship, better sleep, a better self. Even spirituality often offers us an optimized version of ourselves. Just one more retreat, one more therapy, one more meditation, one more layer peeled from the onion, and finally I will be finished.

At some point, I stopped believing that I was an onion. Perhaps I am not a project and do not have to emerge from this life one day as the finally corrected version of myself. I can explore myself without constantly wanting to improve myself. That is something different. Exploration requires curiosity. Improvement already knows the desired result. And this is exactly where the subject of courage appears again: not the courage to accomplish some spiritual achievement, but the courage to see something inside myself without having already decided what it must become. If pain is there, I can look at it. If darkness is there, that too. If I make a fool of myself, wonderful. That was going to happen more often later. If something is beautiful, I do not have to immediately try to hold on to it. Perhaps that is the courage I am looking for: less control, more openness.

Being alone, for me, does not mean that I do not need other people. I have met extraordinary people: teachers, friends, lovers, therapists, artists, and a master who deeply influenced my life. Without them I would not be the same person. But nobody could see for me. A master can point to something, a friend can hold me, a therapist can ask a question, someone I love can hold up a mirror. But eventually the next movement is mine. That is precisely why this invisible thread became increasingly important to me, more important than any method. I did not know where it led. That was probably its greatest quality. It had no arrow saying: ENLIGHTENMENT, 3.7 KILOMETRES. It was simply there, sometimes clearly, sometimes barely perceptible, and slowly I began to trust that I did not constantly have to run ahead of it.

This does not mean that I believe everything in life happens at the right time or that everything has some hidden meaning. I have seen too many things that were simply terrible for that. But in my own life, I repeatedly noticed something strange. Some experiences arrived before I could understand them. Others lay beside the road like stones for decades until one day I returned and suddenly saw what had been hidden underneath. I did not have to turn over every stone today. I could wait. Patience with my own blindness became something new for me. Not every darkness has to become light immediately, not every question needs an answer today, and not every hole needs to be filled. I can sit beside it for a while and see what happens.

By now, this too is part of trust for me. Not the idea that This will take care of me like some friendly cosmic caretaker, and not a guarantee that everything will end well. Simply the trust that I do not need to know every next step in advance. I can move with life without possessing its choreography. Less like a stone, more like water. That may also explain why some of the most important events of my life happened precisely when I had planned nothing. I did not search for my master. At twenty-eight, I did not know what a Satori was. I had no idea what doors certain crises would open decades later. Had I known beforehand what I was supposed to search for, I probably would have searched for exactly that, and precisely because of it failed to see something else.

The unknown has one fundamental problem: the moment I know what it is supposed to look like, it is no longer unknown. That thought later became decisive for me. At the time, it was merely a feeling, a thread into nowhere. And nowhere is not such a bad place. There, I do not have to know. Something can appear there that does not fit my previous ideas. Life can surprise me there. Perhaps that is precisely the space I mean by This: not something far away, not something that must be attained, not the summit of a mountain, but this. The breath, the tree, the person in front of me, the fear, the silence, the chaos, the moment before I name it.

Ah, This.

And if I want to know when I first truly felt this thread, I have to go a long way back. I was seventeen. It was the middle of an icy February night. And the roof of our house was on fire.