

TOBIAS BECK

UN BOX

YOUR RELATIONSHIP!

**SPIEGEL
Bestseller**

Wie du
Menschen für
dich gewinnst
und stabile
Beziehungen
aufbaust

GABAL

Tobias Beck

Unbox your Relationship!

[image]

Tobias Beck

Unbox your Relationship!

How to attract the right people and build relationships that last

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Foreword

For me, meeting Tobias Beck was a truly lucky opportunity - and I'm reliably informed that countless others feel the same. All those who have encountered him as a coach, speaker, author or simply a fellow human being; people he's inspired with his genuine professionalism, refreshing sense of humour and inspiring energy.

Tobias is one of the few people I endorse whole-heartedly as an exceptional talent among speakers in the German-speaking world: in his "regular" life, he's an outstanding orator as well as an author. All the more impressive, then, that he's once again knocked it out of the park: following on from the best-selling *Unbox Your Life!*, *Unbox Your Relationship!* is a truly entertaining, polarising, unconventional, bold and captivating book.

I know this industry like the back of my hand. As such, I can quite confidently proclaim Tobias as one of the true greats – if not the greatest – on the German-language speaking and publishing scene.

Yet even more significant than his own talent is his exceptional and rare gift for making others great: for recognising potential that they might not have recognised in themselves. This skill is a manifestation of his own greatness. With his seminars, books, podcasts and inspirational speeches, it is Tobias' mission, to build others up and make them successful; to help them finally "unpack" their own lives and their own relationships.

In doing so, he's a "people whisperer", a motivator, an inspirer and a changer of mentalities and, above all that, a *real person* – just like you and me.

Tobias' new book reinforces his status as a true all-round talent. It's a treasure trove of wisdom: an invaluable resource for those seeking to improve their relationships not only with their romantic partner, but with everyone around them.

As you dive into this literary treasure trove, I hope you are as boundlessly enthused as I was, and that you discover just as much momentum, intellectual stimulation and creative inspiration.

Finally, a word of "warning": This book can – and will - change your relationship(s) and your whole life!

With all best wishes,

Hermann Scherer

Prologue

Have I loved?
Have I helped others to love?
Have I raised others up?
Have I left footprints on others' hearts instead of leaving them empty?

Older people sometimes ask curious questions that I, as a community service worker at the tender age of eighteen, did not understand much about.

Who were these "others", and was life not about making the most of my own journey? No, I came to learn; this was not the case. Life is about so much more. We as individuals are not the cornerstone of our existence.

If there's one thing that's now become clear, it's that our relationships with others are our only constant companions in life - whether we want them or not.

Since the beginning of time, we have been programmed to connect with other people – but in a world where any and every wish can be satisfied with the swipe of a smartphone, it's easy to forget this. Next time you make a decision that deliberately leaves your options open, I invite you instead to take responsibility - for someone, something, anything. People are not products to be consumed and then left empty. Our hearts can handle plenty, but they cannot simply be regenerated at will.

Start by choosing a film on Netflix and watching it through to the end instead of checking the reviews to see if there's anything better. Ride it out; breathe; feel it. Give things a chance instead of drawing rash conclusions.

We live in an age in which thousands of young people are permanently preoccupied with the quest of self-realisation. But this is, to all intents and purposes, a relatively new thing: at no other time in history have we had the opportunity to shape our lives according to our own visions and values, and it has never been available to more than a small, privileged section of the population. Moreover, in this desperate striving to be all that we wish to be, we too often forget the foundation of our existence: family. Family means so much more than similar genetics: family are the people with whom we feel at home and by whom we are loved unconditionally, simply for being who we are.

Perhaps the people I'm describing are no longer or have never been in your life. If this is the case, please don't set this book to one side. Understand that even if you feel it, you are never alone. The people you are looking for are also looking for you; you simply need to open up your heart again and let others into your life again.

We live in a world that strives for perfection and forgets that relationships are not a filtered Instagram snapshot. Relationships exist alongside and because of us and, as such, are also like us: unique, flawed, and constantly changing. This is a good thing. Perfection is far too static a state for the colourful emotional world in which our relationships reside. We need relationships to be happy, yet it is this dynamic emotional world that makes it so difficult for us to establish them in the first place.

In the first part of this book, I'll take you on a journey of discovery to yourself and the people in your life. We'll explore together how you can achieve fulfilled relationships with yourself and others, despite each one of them being as unique and individual as you are.

In the second part of the book, I'll introduce my animal-based model of the four basic types of human: whale, shark, dolphin and owl. This model has already inspired millions online, saved marriages, turned offices into creative spaces, resolved disputes and engendered understanding. You should be looking forward to getting to know the animal inside of you – because rest assured, one exists. There might even be more than one at the same time! Once you've discovered your animal, you'll also find out how it's linked to a certain millennia-old mystery.

As you read, I wish you plenty of enjoyment, memorable moments with yourself and "others" and a productive journey of discovery.

When freedom makes us lonely

Thanks to our networked world, we have more relationships than ever before. We've never been in touch with so many people at any one time, and it's never been so hard for us to open up to one another. But this hasn't always been the case.

We were conceived as a result of our parents' relationship with one another, and recent studies have shown that an infant who is nourished solely by food will not survive long. We need social relationships and emotional ties in order to exist and thrive. What's more, we require them at a certain level of intensity in order to lead a happy and fulfilling life, because the quality of our relationships - private and professional - is what determines our overall satisfaction.

Nothing about this state of affairs has changed in the last millennia. What has changed is the world in which we are required to form these relationships.

Just a few decades ago, it was usual – even vital for survival - that a person never left their village, their immediate environment and the people they grew up with. They might marry and move into the neighbouring village, but there, too, there were rigid social structures to be integrated into: several generations often lived together under one roof.

In this network of relationships based on small villages and settlements, each individual had

a place and a defined role. People knew and trusted each other. Business dealings were based on verbal contracts and, depending on the region in which people grew up, religion was of great importance. The belief in something greater was a common source of solace in bad times. This form of coexistence provided protection, security and a sense of affinity for the community as a whole. But the possibilities for realising oneself as an individual were limited, and the collective character of coexistence restricted individual freedom. The daughter of the baker always became a baker herself, and would never dream of opening her own clothes store or designing high heels in neon colours.

When times changed, they did so rapidly. For us as humans, the evolution from collective community to anonymous individuals progressed so quickly that we sometimes struggle to keep up: we chase our lives breathlessly in an attempt not to let them get completely out of sight. In the anonymity of the 21st century, we suddenly have more freedom than is actually good for us. Our fear of missing out is so great that endless choice renders us unable to decide.

As soon as we have decided on one thing, another automatically becomes more appealing. We move restlessly from one city to another, across continents; here today, there tomorrow. Wherever we are, we find new people, people whose language we speak purely because we're in the same boat. We feel lonely together, no longer daring to open up to one another or to choose people who might not choose us. We fear rejection. We fear that people will leave us tomorrow, to new and better adventures. We have become globetrotters without roots or responsibilities. The security, comfort and sense of belonging we used to get from a whole village we now seek from a single person - our partner.

The happiness of a family hinges more than ever on the relationship of the parents. But because we are unable to be all things to one person at the same time, and because we have forgotten how to fulfil our needs from many different relationships, we have more single households than families - especially in urban areas. Almost every third marriage now ends in divorce, and more children are growing up with separated parents than ever before.

For the first time in human history, it is possible for humans to define the meaning and direction of their own lives – and we are privileged enough to be among this number. If we want to become a deep-sea diver in the Caribbean and crack open a fresh coconut in the evenings under a palm-leaf roof, we can. By the same token, if we want to become a cardiac surgeon, buy an apartment on the Upper East Side and change the human world forever with our work, we're free to do so.

The problem is that we, as humans, were not designed to have this level of freedom. Our modern life expectancy is four times the average lifespan of the Middle Ages, and many people reach or exceed it. We “break camp”, reinvent ourselves, start from scratch. We have the freedom to do so. We have the freedom to change our minds or to commit to nothing - which we often do, because the many available options make us dizzy with choice. We are scared to choose an option that makes all others impossible; in fact, the freedom to be able to do anything is what also threatens to make us lonely.

This is because what we really need to live a happy and fulfilling life is a reliable network of committed relationships with people we love. We need people who - despite all the freedom

on offer, the myriad choices open to us and all our opportunities for self-realisation - still provide us comfort, reflect our values and give us the security of being loved.

In order to not lose ourselves in a world of possibilities, it is vital that we remember our need for relationships and regain the ability to relate to one another. That's why, in the first part of this book, I invite you to come on a journey with me - to the best relationships of your life.

You've always been enough

Have you ever thought about who you talk to most during the day? Without having ever met you, I know who this person is - and I also know you're not shy to say what you think. This talk is the straightest of straight talk, and your feedback is free from glitter and rainbows. You put all nonsense aside, leave out the niceties and concentrate on what really matters: where you are falling short and how you could be better.

It begins in the morning, before the first coffee, when you stumble over the scales on your way to the shower and launch into the first tirade. "Why do you keep on getting fatter? You could really have done without the milk chocolate and the luxury crisps in bed last night in front of the TV." Perhaps you stand in front of the mirror in the morning and comment blithely on your thinning hair, your wrinkles – and, for good measure, your bulbous nose, crooked toes, the state of your messy apartment, your non-existent fitness levels or, depending on how you're feeling that, day, the very existence of your imperfect, undisciplined life.

I'm sure you wouldn't allow a single person around you to talk about you as you sometimes do.

There's one person you talk to without pause your whole life long: yourself!

On average, you think 60,000 thoughts a day. If you take a moment to be completely honest with yourself, you'll find you often phrase these thoughts in a tone for which you'd instantly cut off partners or friends - without explanation and with no chance for forgiveness. You wouldn't tolerate it for a second - and yet you allow your inner voice to follow you round, make you feel guilty and brand you as the hopeless cluster of cells you (think you) are. Tell me: *how can this make any sense?!*

Aside from the fact that these statements bear little or no relation to reality, there's one other reason they're especially harmful. If we say things often enough, we start to believe them!

Read this sentence again, because it's absolutely crucial:

If we say things to ourselves enough, we start to believe them!

What happens if we hold fast to a particular belief in something, even though it's not the case? At some point in time, our brains cannot tell if the things we incessantly tell ourselves are true or fiction. They cannot tell if the invisible voice that chases us round and disapprovingly refers to every chocolate bar as a "failure" is correct, or talking absolute nonsense. Once they have heard it enough times, our brains simply start to believe it.

Later on in the cycle, the things we believe are manifested in our lives. Our beliefs about ourselves are made tangible in countless ways: our demeanour, our body language, our voice, our salary negotiations, our next date, our presentations, our children's education, our friendships, and all our relationships with others. Our inner voice influences our whole life, and although other people cannot hear it, they can sense it in the way we relate to ourselves.

At this juncture, let me offer some advice.

The only thing your inner voice should be telling you each morning – in front of the bathroom mirror, pre-shower, with scruffy pyjamas and bad breath – is that you are the greatest, most beautiful and brightest star under the sun. Anything else? It's talking nonsense. Has that made you chuckle? Chuckle away – laughing breaks down stress hormones! But don't forget the very real message: that you *are* great. Your talents, big and small, are valuable. Take a moment to reflect on all you have achieved. Write down what you have to be proud of. If the space here is not enough, get a flipchart and fill it up - in size six font!

[image]

I know that at some point in your life - maybe even a few times too many - you have stood breathless and exhausted at a crossroads, then sat down and cried bitterly on the cold, hard asphalt. You didn't know what to do anymore. You felt alone, with no idea how to take the next step, let alone how to decide on the direction. But I also know that you summoned all your courage and your last ounce of energy, and just went on.

Before you read on, can you give yourself a hug for each and every time you stood up again?

"But Tobi, I've made so many mistakes." Really? Me too - and that's a good thing! Mistakes make us human and give us the opportunity to keep learning. I make mistakes time and again, but I learn from them and make better mistakes next time.

Only when you start to be forgiving of yourself, to be kind to yourself in the face of setbacks and to show yourself the same appreciation as you do others can you really begin to love yourself. Once this happens, you'll no longer need two slabs of chocolate and a main course of luxury crisps to dim the frustration. You'll no longer need the cigarettes you cling to feverishly or the gallons of alcohol you use to forget about what you are but do not want to be.

Once you start to love yourself, you'll no longer need all the things the world tells you you need to be better, more beautiful or more desirable. If you think about it, the flip side of these advertising messages is that without these things, you are not enough. You need the makeup that makes you "flawless", the statement watch that earns you clout, the sports car

to impress your date or the hundredth anti-cellulite gel for ninety-nine pounds a pot. But the truth is, you don't need any of it, because:

You've always been enough.

You've always been adorable, unique and desirable - just as you are. However, you rarely hear this message in the modern world, because if you acknowledged it, you'd stop consuming all the things we listed above.

How do we reprogram our inner voice? To do so, we have to begin listening to ourselves carefully and often, constantly asking ourselves what kind of untruths it might be telling. The most dangerous thing about this habit is when we fail to realise we are even doing it. The familiar becomes automatic and, at some point, occurs on a completely unconscious basis. Much of what we tell ourselves consists of old beliefs that we picked up in childhood or adolescence. Children – as we must constantly bear in mind when we become parents ourselves – suck up everything they hear like a sponge and believe it, some of it for the rest of their lives.

Deep down inside you is a little version of yourself that never gets older. If you're willing to embrace it, we'll go on a journey with this little "you" in the next chapter!

This little "you" stays four years old forever and believes every sentence you say. Everything you say to them is their reality, and thus also yours. No matter how old you are, your inner voice speaks to the little boy or little girl inside you, and they flinch every time they hear that they are not valuable, pretty, successful, ambitious, thin or disciplined enough: that they are not enough, were not enough, and will never be enough.

What no-one ever tells us is that once we become an adult, it is our job to take care of ourselves. We hold firm to the belief that others will always be there to do it for us. Because our parents took care of us for so long, we go out into life and search for a replacement: a new “parent” in the form of a partner.

We become reliant on the care of others. We let others determine how we feel and forget that we we are able to control it ourselves. It is not another’s love for us that begins a happy relationship, but rather our love for ourselves.

A journey to your inner child

Before you embark on this journey with me, I want you to create the right atmosphere. Make yourself comfortable and put on this piece of music, which I took the liberty of having specially composed:

<http://unboxyourrelationship.de/traumreise>

It's important not to have any fear - there's no such thing as "doing it wrong". Even if you're unsure of what lies ahead, try to allow yourself to embrace it.

Want to improve your relationship? Congratulations: this is an admirable goal. To achieve it, however, there's one key point you'll need to address – and it's up to you whether you treat it as a stumbling block or an amazing opportunity. Before you are able to establish a truly resilient bond with another, there's one person with whom you'll need to make peace and fall in love all over again. This person is yourself.

Perhaps this sentence caused you to pause for breath. That's okay. Take a breath to inhale and exhale slowly, then read through the following exercise and join me on a journey to the person deep inside you. There, there is a young boy or girl who has yearned, for years, to connect with you. Perhaps your access to this inner child has been muddied – buried by self-doubt, disparaging statements (spoken by others, then assimilated into your own self-talk), pain and negative experiences. Now, I invite you to let go. The things you'll learn when you reopen these channels will change your life and your relationships forever.

Play the piece of music above, or simply enjoy the silence. No matter how you focus best, you should remain undisturbed for at least ten minutes.

Sit on a chair, comfortable but upright. Roll your shoulders up and back to loosen your spine, place both feet on the floor and close your eyes.

You may start to notice small sounds around you; to hear your breathing and perceive the thoughts that race through your head. Let them go; do not assign them any significance. You may start to be aware of your body, your pelvic bones and legs, your stomach, shoulders, arms and head. Breathe.

You might feel your heart beating; with every heartbeat, you relax a little more. Allow the rhythmic beating to draw you ever further into your inner world. Imagine you have light weights hanging from your hands and feet, and with every breath, they become a little heavier. You become ever more deeply immersed in a state of calm and relaxation. Let your breath and heartbeat carry you inside yourself.

If spontaneous thoughts persist, know that this is completely natural. Let them waft like clouds over your consciousness; concentrate on your breathing and heartbeat. This time is for you and you alone.

As you immerse yourself deeper in this state of relaxation, imagine yourself leaving your body and floating in the air. Picture yourself leaving the room you are sitting in and floating into another one, somewhere in your consciousness.

As you breathe, each breath delivers you deeper into a state of reassuring warmth.

You land in this other room, feel the floor under your feet and look around. On each wall, you see pictures hanging; pictures upon pictures. As you look more closely, you see that all of them are photographs; not only that, but they are photographs of you. You see yourself in every corner and can scarcely believe your eyes. The images show you on your journey through your life: from where you are now back to your first seconds outside the womb.

You move through the room as if moving along a timeline, becoming younger with every image. You are 20, then 18; you see yourself driving a car for the first time, or at your first workplace. You see yourself as a teenager, laughing with friends, then as a ten-year-old child on the way to school. With every photograph, you travel further backwards in your life. Finally, you see yourself as a small child: five, four, then three years old. Your smile is radiant, and you dance, jump and laugh with joy.

As you move, astonished, through this inner chamber of consciousness, you feel a brush against your right hand. Someone is reaching gently for your fingers, pushing their little hand into yours. Amazed, you look down and see a small child in front of you. Your eyes meet and you realise - there you are, at the age of just two or three.

You feel a further wave of astonishment and joy rising deep within you, surging through your body as you look into each other's eyes. "Wow," you realise, "that's me!"

The child looks you in the eye and begins to sob. As the tears stream down their face, they speak aloud. "Finally!" they say. "Finally, you're here! I've waited for you for so long!"

If, at this point, you feel intense emotions attempting to surface: let them. Give them space, allow them free rein.

“I’ve missed you so much!” the child cries. “Every day you put on a mask and hide yourself! Please, please, play with me again!”

You look the child deep in the eyes, follow your intuition and your heart, stretch out your hand and take the child in your arms – loving, strong, full of joy. You envelop them in your embrace, hold them close to your heart and connect with them. The bond between your hearts grows tighter; you feel the energy and deep love between you, finally allowed to flow once again.

The child quivers in your arms, full at once of deep emotion, tears, laughter and joy. That you are there is the only thing they wish for. They long for you not to be locked in a performance of adulthood; to remember to play, laugh and snuggle with them, to devote yourself to them. They want to be close to you.

As you bury your face in the child’s soft hair, you feel a surge of incomparable, unconditional love: a feeling of love that is deep and unending. In your mind, you speak to the child. “I love you,” you say. “I care about you. I love you, because you are the only thing I really have in this world. I promise to take care of you, because if I love you, I can love others, too!”

In your thoughts, you hug the little one tightly and feel your two hearts beating together. You

take each other in; your gazes meet once more; you see the face of the child in front of you. Before it's time for you both to leave, you bestow the child with a beautiful, powerful gift for their journey. You bid them goodbye with love – in word and in feeling.

Suddenly, you notice that the room around you is beginning to spin – first slowly, then increasingly quickly. You and the child spin with it, the child in your arms, as safe and full of lightness as on a summer's day on the beach. Their face beams with happiness. Suddenly, amidst this profound moment of joy, a realisation descends. This is reality! This child is always with you; this lightness, this joy and deep love are always there. What's more, this is something no-one can ever take away.

You spin for few more seconds, then gradually prepare to return to the room where your journey began. You take a deep breath, then count down slowly from five.

Five

You leave the beach and channel your consciousness to return to your body.

Four

You begin to feel your legs and arms. You feel yourself sitting in your chair and perceive the room around you.

Three

You imagine fresh, crystal-clear spring water washes lapping about your head and your consciousness, energising you and waking you up.

Two

You take a deep breath, and feel free and full of love.

One

You're back in the here and now.

Affirmations for your dialogue with your inner child

"It's amazing that you're here, and it's amazing that you are exactly how you are."

"You are perfect! It's only a shame that the people around you have so often failed to notice it."

"Thank you for everything you have endured! You are so strong."

"Before, I wasn't able to appreciate you – but I promise never to let you be overburdened or ignored again!"

"I'll never leave you to the mercy of strangers again. For me, you are number one!"

"Leave the difficult stuff to me in the future; your job is to be a child. You can play, laugh or even be sad, if you want to. Never fear – I'll be keeping watch!"

A parent's love

"It is a strange thing, but parents are people too; and when it comes to producing and raising offspring, they are no more adept than unskilled workers." -- LORIENT

There's a Japanese proverb that says: "It is only once one has children that one recognises the greatness of a parent's love.". Since becoming a father, I can attest to its veracity. There is much we can only understand once we have children ourselves: the love for a small person that we helped create, the worry about whether they have all they need and, above all, the worry that we as parents could fail at our immense task.

As father to my children Maya and Emil, I am something of a tour guide on life's journey of adventure. My task, as I see it, is to build their strengths and to recognise that they – as tiny humans – consist of a body, a mind and a soul. I believe that each of us, as humans, has our very own "soul plan" – and if we allow ourselves to follow it, we will flourish. As such, it's important to me that my children understand they are loved unconditionally; that they are enough and perfect, just as they are. All babies are born without prejudice. I do not wish to impose my view of the world on them, but to share special moments with them, help them lay deep roots and encourage them to find their paths, without taking away any of their agency in the process.

My wife Rita and I do not wish to be the kind of parents that raise carbon copies of themselves, or pursue their own missed opportunities and ambitions through their children. That can never be sustainable, because ultimately, it only serves the parents' wishes.

Over the years, I've witnessed some great ways of letting children explore their passions independently. The one that stands out most, however, is a very special children's orchestra: one that remained in my mind long after I'd heard it.

As part of this orchestra, children are let loose once a year in the instrument storage room, where they're permitted to pick out an instrument purely of their own choosing. Thus it can happen, for example, that a gentle six-year-old girl points to a huge tuba and proudly drags it onto the stage.

Once all children have made their decisions, they stand behind a thick curtain. Then, the magic occurs: the curtain is lifted on a jam-packed concert hall and the audience stand and applaud with vigour. The children aren't even required to play: instead, they are allowed to simply "be". Amazingly, in most cases, they go on to practise their chosen instrument independently, so enchanted are they by the atmosphere in which that first encounter took place.

As we've already learned, all humans, whether adults or children, have an innate longing for love. In the ideal case, this love goes through a number of stages:

1. As babies, we demand love with vigorous crying and are comforted and cuddled in our parents' arms.
2. Some time later, we learn that we receive love when we do something to earn it or give love ourselves.
3. We love without convention and without expecting anything in return. By this stage, we are rich in love!
4. The highest level - the ability to love even when we've been hurt.

Sadly, even in adulthood, some people resort to crying for love and attention. Clearly, they have not succeeded in progressing through the stages. But why? Why do some people linger at an undeveloped level, while others learn to love despite hurt? Why do some develop an unwavering level of basic trust, while others search their whole lives and never find it – in themselves or in others? Why are some people able to build stable relationships apparently without thinking about it, while others are disappointed again and again?

In childhood, it is the role of our parents not only to explain the world to us, but to demonstrate it in all its rich shades. They show us what love is and how to live it. They teach us what we need to do to be loved or, in the best case scenario, that being loved isn't a transaction. They determine the boundaries of what is good and what is bad. As children, we absorb all of this like sponges, because at that point, we don't know any better. Above all, we trust. We trust intuitively, while adults struggle to trust at all or require a generous safety net. Children are born with an innate level of trust in the fact that no-one means badly towards them and that, above all, their parents want the best for them.

Incidentally, I believe this also applies in cases where parents and grown-up children no longer communicate regularly. Simply: parents always want the best for their children, whereby this "best" is defined by the parents' value systems. This, in turn, is absorbed largely from their own parents, and it is not uncommon for these values to be passed down wholesale from one generation to the next.

This is likely how you obtained some of the beliefs that are incongruous with your current reality – and which, as a result, you can reasonably strike from your world view. "Nothing

in life comes for free” is an obvious example. Certainly, in the harsh years that followed World War II, such a warning was justified; it existed for a reason and was more or less correct. Admittedly, love was free back then as it is today - but humans can’t subsist on love alone. Nowadays, we live in a prosperous and benevolent society: one in which many people have all they need and are keen to give back where they can. This means we get a number of things for “free”, without an ulterior motive or the expectation of anything in return.

These things don’t necessarily need to be material in nature - often, it’s the case that those who have fortified their mental, spiritual or intellectual reserves are willing to help others do the same. Of course, on the other hand, there are a number of places where “nothing comes for free” is still an everyday reality. There are places where people struggle even to maintain their own reserves, and this is sad enough in itself.

Perhaps your parents often told you that you were a “worry-wart” and so, as an adult, you shy away from new challenges. Perhaps you were always a “failure” at maths, because you only came home with Cs and Ds. In all likelihood, this will have shaken your confidence such that your aversion to the subject still persists today: as soon as you’re required to add up in your head, your brain turns to mush and three times three makes six. You and I know that this is *not* due to a fundamental lack of mathematical ability.

Perhaps you’ve spent years engaging with a very different doctrine for life; perhaps you forged a career because of pressure from your mother. “My daughter will do things differently than me,” she might have said. “My daughter won’t have children so early; my daughter will complete her studies.” Perhaps, in secret, you felt lonely, because you actually wanted something else: a family, a house in the countryside, a comfortable middle-class existence. But even without knowing it, you lived out your mother’s projections – the life that you willingly learned.

Wherever and however these beliefs originated, I’m quite certain that it was never your parents’ intention to make things hard for you. On the contrary - your parents love you and want the best for you. Might they sometimes have been impatient in the way they conveyed this? Of course! Might there have been phases in which they prioritised their needs over your own? Probably, at times. Did they replicate patterns they’d picked up from their own parents and perpetuate them with little reflection? Almost definitely. Why? Because parents are people too – and because children are the most wonderful, but often also the most tiring and challenging gift one could wish for. It’s because, as a mother or father, we must find our own balance between two ultimately incompatible things: the desire to keep our children close and, at the same time, to allow them to spread their wings. This is one of the greatest

challenges of all, and as such, it's quite normal to occasionally give more weight to one desire than the other.

Even if it seems a rather fanciful notion, I like to think that we choose our own parents. After a long search, my choice settled on Erika and Horst Beck from Wuppertal: the only people in the universe willing to take on and lovingly mentor a chaotic non-conformist like me. Looking back, I am particularly thankful for the primal trust they placed in me. I knew that I could always come back home and be loved unconditionally, without having to do anything in return. My parents always made me feel that I was "enough" and that, one day, I'd make something great of myself.

When it came to what this "something" was, they were relatively unspecific; in fact, they displayed incredible patience with my ever-changing whims. Even as my peers began to formulate solid future plans, my own "plan" was shifting on a weekly basis. From doctor to zoologist to importer of Alaskan blueberries: nothing was off the table, and with each new idea, my parents worked steadfastly to ensure that I felt supported and valid. Their support always brought me happiness. My parents deserve a heartfelt thanks - for allowing me to spread my wings and, in turn, to help others fly and be the best versions of themselves. My parents didn't always have it easy with me, and it's only thanks to their example that I can guide my own children in the way they deserve.

"Children who are loved grow into loving adults."

From the start of their lives, children are tiny, fully-formed personalities, each equipped with their own character traits and an irrepressible will. They come into the world with their own sense of "why". Sometimes, they are so similar to us that it is difficult to distinguish their wishes and desires from our own; sometimes, their sense of "why" is so foreign to us that

we must look far behind our own horizons to understand it. Some parents succeed in doing this; others are rather more poorly equipped. This is not because they are ill-intentioned (and let me be clear, this book is not intended to touch on abuse or neglect of any kind), but rather because – in some cases – their own sense of “why” has so long been buried. Other times, they may simply lack the energy or the capacity for self-reflection; in the worst case scenario, all these factors may converge at once.

The older we become, the more difficult we find it to process the changes around us and to integrate them into our world. We’re all familiar with the saying “Everything was better as it used to be”. While this doesn’t apply as a universal truth; it *is* true that at some point, our internal “hard discs” become full and our experiences so entrenched that our brains find it difficult to form new connections. At their relatively older age, some parents find this easier than others.

And even when parents realise that they have got something – or many things – wrong, they often find it hard to admit it. Perhaps they weren’t there for their child when they needed them, and worry they wouldn’t be able to live with the admission. Sometimes, we need to accept an apology we know we’re never going to receive – not for our parents’ sake, but for our own. Our parents did the best they could, and whatever we lacked in our childhood and youth is a piece of the puzzle that’s now gone for good. We must rid ourselves of the notion that, at some point, we can recover it. All we can do is fill the gap of our own accord by striving to forgive.

At some point, it comes time to break away from the people who raised us; to remember the good memories and forgive them for the bad such that we can let them go in love and peace. Moreover, our parents no longer necessarily need to be alive in order for us to do

this. The beauty of forgiveness is that you only need yourself to carry it out.

Which beliefs about yourself and the world have you absorbed unconsciously from your parents? Think about them and write them down. If you judge certain beliefs to be correct and beneficial, and thus wish to retain them, great! If, on the other hand, you find a belief difficult to support or justify, cross it out and practise consciously removing it from your thoughts the next time it occurs to you.

[image]

The trip of your life

How often do you look over the shoulder of a colleague at work and think, “Well, you can do it that way – but it really isn’t very effective.” And how often, when you see the result, do you have to ungrudgingly concede that, “Actually, that wasn’t so stupid after all.”

Many people are different than you.

Not just different, but *fundamentally* different. They reason things in ways you would never dream of, solve problems in their own manner, and dream of different adventures than you. That’s a good thing; that’s what makes our world colourful and exciting. Some people need to jump out of a helicopter with skis to feel alive, while for others, slicing bread by hand is a life on the edge. The fact that it is difficult to find common ground with some people does not make it impossible.

Not all characters at Disneyland are the same – but at the end of the day, everybody is celebrating together, with glitter, confetti and a huge dose of fun. And that’s what it’s about. We only have this one trip; our time is limited.

If all of us had just one vacation, the chance to take one big journey in our lives, would we spend it comparing ourselves with others, or would we listen excitedly to those we met, learning about how they think and wishing them a wonderful time?

The journey in the paragraph above really exists. It’s your life!

What differentiates the adventurers of the world from the package tourists is that the latter

spend their travels firmly in their comfort zone. They want nothing more than to surround themselves with similar people and spend the day whining about others – those who happen to have better weather, to pay less or to pick the shorter queue. But it makes little sense to waste days in this way!

On the other hand, adventurers know that on their journey, they should listen to the experiences of fellow travellers, learn from them, and recognise that an adventure shared is the best kind of fun.

In my eyes, the journey of life is a bit like taking a coach trip – not a fully air-conditioned five-star model, but the kind that gets a puncture in the middle of the South American plains. The kind whose air conditioning fails at 30 degrees in the shade and whose toilet is clogged at precisely the moment you get a dodgy stomach. This is travelling outside your comfort zone, with all the stops, detours and calamities that life adventurers experience on their one, grand life journey.

In life, we board our bus, meet our parents and, initially, believe they'll always travel with us. Though we eventually learn that this is not the case, many more travellers will board to take their place: siblings, cousins, mentors and friends. If we're lucky, we might be joined by the love(s) of our lives – the first, the second and perhaps even the third.

There'll be people who remind us of what we don't want to be. Some departures will leave gaping holes, while others will go unnoticed or cause us to breathe a sigh of relief. The journey of life is a journey of joys, sorrows, greetings and farewells. Some people leave footprints on and everlasting memories in our hearts. Success in life is not contingent on

getting on with everyone, understanding them or persuading them that our way is best, but on simply enjoying the journey.

This is important, because the huge conundrum of life is that we never know when our destination will change or our trip will be over. As such, we must live, love, forgive and always give our best. If we do so, we'll be left with only beautiful thoughts when the time comes to disembark.

This life is your adventure, and you alone decide where it takes you.

Who are the people on your “bus of life”? Which of them have left footprints on your heart? Think about them, then pick up the phone and call them! Tell them about this book and how it challenged you to think about the people you care about most.

[image]