

Sibylle Barden-Fürchtenicht

The Good Crisis

How to conquer your fears and
master life's crises

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by Sibylle Barden-Fürchtenicht

INTRODUCTION

Why This Book?

Crises are a part of life. They're no longer an exception, they happen every day. And what's astonishing is that almost nobody knows how to handle them. People are distressingly unprepared for the things that await them in the course of their lives. Sudden changes trigger insecurity and fear. People seem ready for action only in good times, when their trust in their own powers is high. Naturally they know that there will be loss, sickness, and pain along their way. They also know that they will die, at some point. And yet: If life takes an unexpected turn or people find themselves in situations where they feel trapped or lost, their courage quickly dissipates. Through the apparent loss of control, people slip almost powerlessly into crisis. People generally think of crises as enemies to be avoided or as a big dose of bad luck.

But is that true?

In moments of total hopelessness, when people stare into their own abyss, they recognize their true strengths. So they say. It's interesting that despite this wonderful perspective, everybody tries really hard to avoid such moments. When my own life plan was catapulted directly into crisis, I asked myself what I was really more afraid of: the hopelessness or my own strength? What do you think? I was reminded of a passage written by Marianne Williamson: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."¹

"It Is Our Light, Not Our Darkness, That Most Frightens Us."

Maybe we should consider crises from a different point of view. Maybe we should try becoming a friend of crises. They have a lot to tell us: We should look honestly into the mirror, remember our own inner power, make a course correction where necessary, and search for inner peace. Our false way of life will be corrected. Crises require new directions. We should clean up our life, part ways from things that are not good for us. We should learn something. Because this is the only way to successfully manage painful crises.

The term crisis comes from Greek and originally meant "to separate, to decide." Now it is defined as "a turning point" or "decisive moment" (Merriam-Webster) and designates "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending" (Merriam-Webster). The fact that the event in question is a turning point, however, is often understood only after it has been averted or overcome. If the event continues in an ever downward trend, it is then called a catastrophe.²

I wrote this book so that your crises won't turn into catastrophes, but instead will end as good crises. I have had many helpers at my side and I want that for you too.

Rule number one: Don't do it alone. You can't do it alone! You need support, no matter what your crisis is about. Successfully managing a crisis is no different than in sports, at your job, at school, or in family planning – if you want to come out victorious, you have to learn from the best. Learn from those who, "when

life gives them lemons, they make lemonade.”³ These people know how it works: they’ve already been where you are right now or know someone who feels very much like you do. They know your fears and setbacks, your feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, and they’ve cried those same tears that you’ve shed. These successful crisis conquerers know how you can reignite your own inner light in the darkness and take the first steps into a new life. This book tells their stories. They’ve all come to realize the piece of advice that Dale Carnegie put so elegantly: “Inaction breeds doubt and fear. Action breeds confidence and courage. If you want to conquer fear, do not sit home and think about it. Go out and get busy.”

Learn from the Best

“We live in the age of fear,” says Bettina Hitzer, the head of the Minerva Research Group at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. “It can be established that fear has gone through a reevaluation period since the 1970s. It is now known that it points out a danger to a person and helps him or her to plan for the future. Fear is no longer judged as paralyzing, and also not as cowardly, but instead it is a feeling of an intelligent and cautious person.”⁴ In other words: Fear is the current fashion. At some point it might change. Then another feeling will take its turn on the big stage. Who knows, maybe that feeling will be happiness. But until then we have to work on managing our fear and its effects as successfully as possible.

Sometimes you’ll make mistakes, and that’s okay. The sooner we accept that, the better we will come out of the crisis. In your life of approximately eight decades (Federal Statistical Office of Germany), you are bound to get on the wrong track at least once. Many of us multiple times. During these times of life it helps to take a brief pause and look at the dilemma. If you’ve accepted and understood your mistakes, you can adapt and change course. There’s not much more to it. Unless we make more of it. Sir Roger Bannister, the British neurologist and middle-distance runner, once described life this way: “Every morning in Africa a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must move faster than the lion or it will not survive. Every morning a lion wakes up and it knows it must move faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve. It doesn't matter if you are the lion or the gazelle, when the sun comes up, you better be moving.”⁵

Sometimes You’re the Gazelle and Sometimes You’re the Lion

We’re convinced that society demands much more from us than just being quicker than everyone else. It is us, ourselves, who are demanding more and more from ourselves. We want to run faster and think more effectively and handle things more wisely. And all that basically with no break. Life offers, or so we believe to understand, tremendously many possibilities. What can someone make of that, if everything is possible? Are we at the right place? have we reached the moment when we want to say: “Here I am, this is where I want to be.”⁶ And if yes, for how long?

We strain and overload our spiritual strength, our flexibility, and our readiness for action. Whoever is only running all the time will soon tire himself out. But we don’t, in turn, admit that this applies to ourselves, too; fatigue is immediately fought off, repressed, negated, or artificially eliminated with medicines or drugs. We believe we must be perfect and fatigue is not part of the deal. We think of it as an enemy. It only wants to help; it is trying to say: “Stop for a moment. Take a breath. Get a hold of yourself.” Instead we suppress the feeling of alleged weakness. So fatigue looks for other ways to get out attention: Sleeplessness compounds, fears awaken, sadness, exhaustion, increased susceptibility to sicknesses. And then, at some point – added onto the continuous stress – something pushes us over the edge. Something that normally you could



definitely absorb and deal with, but unfortunately not now in your state of being pressured from multiple directions: it could be a separation from a loved one, perhaps the loss of a job or possibly a death in the family. Then it's over. We can't deal with it any longer. We have no more reserves. We fail in our self-made claims of perfection. And we run, with eyes wide open, into crisis.

Simply crazy.

Weren't we doing everything just so we wouldn't end up exactly in this position? And now here we are anyway. Now the situation is dangerous to us existentially. It represents a threat; and a solution with conventional methods is no longer feasible. Fear sets in. Above all, however, we have no plan. What we get from those around us is lack of understanding, in the best case, pity. A nightmare. We look into the abyss and know that we are the only ones who can change course. But just that is exactly what we dare not do. The fear grows bigger. A vicious cycle develops.

The Difference Between Dream and Reality is Action

That's where you must try to go: toward action! When I was overcome with fear and my own identity hung somewhere between the sky and the ground, I took a radical step. I decided, like J. K. Rowling, the mother of everything Harry Potter, to strip away the inessential. "I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me."⁷ My crisis was triggered by my return to Germany. What had I done? I had catapulted my English husband (after thirty years) and myself (after ten years) out of the cosmopolitan, international financial center of London right into German provinciality. Instead of big leagues of global debates and discourse, we had been demoted to the minor leagues of toll roads and commuter tax allowances. I hadn't expected to feel that way. Most of all, I hadn't considered how much I'd developed personally in London – I'd changed, my needs were different now. Not only that: Germany no longer felt like home; that was a bitter loss. I no longer knew what or where home was. After two years shouldering a burden of guilt, displacement, and rejection, I sat down at the kitchen table one morning in May and thought about how I could get out from my crisis and my state of shock. How could I change from the sick lion that could no longer catch a mouse back into a healthy lioness that could run down even the fastest gazelle?

I wrote three questions on a piece of paper:

What could I do easily that I was also good at? I was a good writer, organizer, and networker.

What did I want to do? I wanted to know how people successfully cope with a crisis. I wanted to become an initiator again, a firework for motivation, vitality, courage, and willpower.

How could I do that? I would learn from the best. I would learn from those who were one step ahead of me, who had proved themselves that people are the master of their own happiness and success.

So now I had my focus: I read books about or by people who I was interested in. I tracked their career choices and changes, stumbled with them through the deep valleys of their crises, and climbed with them to the heights of their successes. I learned about the depression and frustrated love of Marie Curie and what she went through to become the scientist we all know. I understood how Abraham Lincoln turned his



melancholy toward the societal tasks that required his full strength. I immersed myself with the wonderful Veuve Clicquot-Ponsardin into the harsh man's world of the Champagne industry; flew with the first woman into space, Valentina Tereshkova, traveled with Paulo Coelho on his search for the meaning of life, and dreamed with J. K. Rowling of a better life on platform 9¾. Because I still couldn't find an answer, I continued my research in New York, searching for why Henry Steinway, the piano maker, left Germany at the age of 53 to start over at the beginning, and from the very bottom, in the new world. I mention these life stories, because you will come across them again in the pages below. They helped me to rearrange my life for the better and I hope that they will have the same effect for you.

I became calmer, less driven by the myriad possibilities of our times. I started to understand that all of these people had gone through difficult periods for many years and the difficulty helped them grow. But my questions on meaning remained unanswered: What do I do with the next 40 years? How can I change the world?

I needed more reality – from living persons. I wanted to know: How do other people actually do it? How do people, especially those who I've met in recent years between Munich and London, Quedlinburg, Germany, New York and Cape Town, successfully manage their crises? Do they have crises at all? I began to research and set off in May 2012 on a trip to visit those who knew the answer.

My trip lasted two years. It led me across Germany, to South Africa, Great Britain, and the USA. I met many wonderful people and heard the most amazing stories. Together, they walked me through their life crises again. I listened carefully as they took me into their fears and down to the deepest points of their crisis. They talked about what it was like with their backs against the wall and what triggered their turnaround for good. How difficult the first steps out of the crisis were, always on the search for a solution, for some understanding, for less pain. Step by step they built up the strength and willpower and courage to take their lives back in their own hands and master their crises successfully. There were setbacks. For some, more than a few. But they kept at it until they had their first small success. From that moment on they had hope. They fought. And not only that, they also made a decision to try for a new goal: they wanted to lead a fulfilled life.

I was surprised by the amount of openness and trust and at the end of each conversation I felt great respect for the power that each of us possesses inside of ourselves. Before the crisis, nobody knew what he or she was capable of, how strong and courageous he or she could be, what he or she could endure and let go of. Most people didn't even realize in advance that they would have to let go of something.

Just in my first interview I realized three essential things:

I am not alone.

There are things I understand, and I am understood by others.

It will get better.

Finally it sank in what all of those who had conquered crises had understood for a long time: A crisis is a wake-up call. A crisis is a friend. It only wants one thing: our best!

Chapter 1

Resilience Is the Secret to Happiness

As the psychologist walked around the room with a glass half full of water, everyone in the seminar was expecting that question about the half-full or half-empty glass. Instead, with a smile, she asked, “How heavy is this glass of water?” The answers ranged from half a pound to two. Then she said, “The exact weight isn’t important. What’s important is how long I hold the glass. If I hold it for a minute, it’s not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, my arm will start to hurt. If I hold it for an entire day, my arm will feel paralyzed. The weight of the glass doesn’t change. But the longer I hold it, the heavier it feels.” Her conclusion: “Stress and worry in our lives are like this glass of water. If you think about them for a short amount of time, nothing happens. If you think about them for a long time, you’ll begin to hurt. And if you think about them all day, you’ll feel paralyzed--it’ll be almost impossible to do anything. It’s important to remember to let go of stress and worry. Put down the glass!”⁸

How quickly we put down the “worry glass” is up to us. Maybe you’ve had the experience of talking to a psychologist and you’ve thought, “This psychologist makes it sound easy to stop worrying, but my case isn’t that simple.” Well, then, here’s the good news: we can all learn how to put down that glass quickly. Think about the people you know. Do some of them seem to be immune to negativity and pessimism? Do you have friends or coworkers who, despite illness, job loss, or bad luck in life or love, simply refuse to lose the joy of living? The secret of happiness lies in that refusal. Scientists call this force resilience. It comes from the Latin and means “to bounce back, to rebound.” In the Harvard Business Manager, resilience is described as “resistance to pressure or stress. Forests usually regenerate quickly after a fire, and some people positively thrive in crisis situations, while others let the stress bring them down.”⁹ In essence, it’s the ability of a Weeble to wobble but not fall down.

Bertram Weiss wrote about resilience in an article titled “On the Search for the Sources of Happiness” in the magazine *Geo Wissen*, “Researchers at Stanford University have hit upon a particular characteristic feature of resilient people: ‘They] can change and reframe their emotions quickly--unpleasant feelings, they shut down right away; pleasant ones they reinforce. Developing this flexibility primarily involves consciously observing one’s own emotions. Those who are aware of their emotions can learn to positively change them--especially in difficult situations.’”¹⁰

This approach is relatively recent in psychology. The article in *Geo Wissen* continues, “Since the field of psychology was founded 130 years ago, psychologists have dedicated themselves primarily to the dark sides of the soul. Psychology was a science of fear, pain, and depression. Just between 1967 and 1994, around 90,000 articles appeared in the relevant journals; only around 5,000 were concerned with joy, satisfaction, and happiness.

Martin Seligman’s championing of positive psychology marked a turning point. He started asking questions nobody had ever asked before, ‘What makes people happy? When do they believe they are satisfied? Why do some people stay more positive than others? Where do the personal sources of happiness reside?’

Seligman found that the following three factors (very briefly summarized here) help people find happiness.

1. Hedonism. Those who devote themselves to beautiful things in life set the stage for many happy moments.
2. Meaningful living. People who find deeper meaning in everyday life and use their own strengths in the service of a higher power find happiness.
3. Active living. Those who place their own abilities and interests at center stage achieve feelings of lasting well-being.



For Seligman and his positive psychology colleagues, 'Feelings of happiness are not a natural state--but the result of ongoing personal development. Anybody can acquire and also strengthen the necessary characteristics through willpower.'¹¹ Seligman named these the Determinants of Happiness and classified them into six core human virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence."¹² He wanted to help people flourish. He believed that we already have the necessary characteristics inside of us; we just have to nurture them so that they thrive and are ready in times of crisis. A good role model for this philosophy is Phil Mickelson, one of the best golfers in the world. At the start of the final round in the 2013 British Open, he found himself in eighth place, and even the most optimistic commentators were already writing him off. But Mickelson ended up winning the tournament with a tremendous come-from-behind victory. In a BBC interview after his win, he said, "You have to be resilient in this game. You have to accept losses and you have to use [them] as motivation, as opposed to letting [them] defeat you. You've got to use [them] as motivation to work harder and come back strong and these last couple of weeks, these last couple of months, I've played some of the best golf of my career." It required all his willpower, resilience, and positive thinking, as well as the courage to do it all over again for every single shot. His victory was the result of twenty years of hard work.

What Are Your Strengths?

What are you good at? What comes easy to you? What can you do just like that, with a snap of your fingers? Or maybe you tell yourself, "Sure, I'm good at organizing, crafting, networking, singing, designing, leading, cooking, managing, or creating art. But that's nothing special, other people can do those things too." Of course they can, but no one can do them exactly like you!

Each of us puts our own personal touch on everything we do. You've probably noticed this with other people. Ask your friends or coworkers what they think you're good at. You might be surprised.

Resilience is especially important when you experience failure. That's when the question always surfaces: should I give up or try again? Our social circle--that is, family, friends, and colleagues--plays a big role in how we answer that question. How much individual resilience does your social circle give you? How does it respond to failure? The answer to that question can have huge repercussions. Your country's culture also plays a part. How openly are mistakes and failure handled in your society? Are they handled at all, or do people act as though nobody ever makes a mistake?

In *The Economist*, an entrepreneur discussed how different cultures in the business world deal with failure. The entrepreneur noted that "the biggest difference between America and Europe is that European investors won't touch you if you have a failed business behind you. In America they won't touch you unless you have. If there is one thing that distinguishes the most creative, entrepreneurial economies it is this embracing of failure."¹³

In Henry Ford's words, "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently." You can't simply outlaw mistakes and trying to do so just causes more fear, which usually leads to even more mistakes. Does this help anyone? Certainly not you. You will make mistakes in your life, big and small. Sometimes you might even make multiple mistakes in a row. That's when you'll need all your strength to build up your courage! Don't waste your energy on covering up, denying, or repressing the mistakes you've made. Success after a failure requires you to focus all your energy on the essentials. Be brave. Be persistent. Be honest. That's the best and most successful way out of a crisis.

Of course, some mistakes can completely shatter your world, even if they eventually turn out okay. This happened to a man you've probably heard of. At the age of seventy-three, when he had expected to be able

to enjoy the success from all his hard work, his life tumbled into chaos and he had to start all over again. There he was, working to pay his bills, touring the world, and subjecting himself to the fear of failure and stage fright and rejection by audiences. Not only that, his age limited what he could do physically. This was Leonard Cohen, the poet turned singer turned monk, always searching inner peace. And now he was something else that almost eclipsed his other identities: almost broke.

What happened? Instead of taking responsibility for his own finances, he gave it up entirely to his manager, a family friend. Finally his daughter became suspicious of some strange bank transactions and warned her father. Cohen looked at his account for the first time in a long time and discovered bank transfers of \$75,000 to the manager. His retirement account, along with the account for his charity, had been nearly wiped out. More than \$5 million was gone.¹⁴ The manager ended up in jail and Leonard Cohen back on stage.

The next time Cohen made the news was with a special moment at Glastonbury in 2008.¹⁵ As he sang his song "Hallelujah," the sun setting behind him, the audience was captivated. Everyone sang along and he left to a standing ovation. Every night during his subsequent concerts, his fans heard him say, "Tonight I'll give you everything I have." And that's one promise he kept. In London in 2009, at the peak of the worldwide financial crisis, the seventy-four-year-old "thanked the audience for 'overcoming financial and geographical obstacles' to be there and to meet him 'at the other side of intimacy.'"

Since 2008, Cohen has received standing ovations nearly every night. In 2013, just shy of eighty, he toured relentlessly in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, the United States, and Europe. He was showered with praise and honors. The media celebrated him as a man whose music was imbued with depth, power, passion, and grace. When Rolling Stone published the fifty best live acts of 2013, Cohen was listed at number 26--in front of Madonna (30) and Beyoncé (33).¹⁶ Resilience allowed him not just to regenerate after the "forest fire" but also to flourish.

Hopefully Cohen's resilience will inspire those in the middle of their own crisis. You don't have to be rich, young, beautiful, or outgoing to successfully handle a crisis. The depth of our pain shows us how strong we are. Those of us who find our way out of that darkness and back into the light won't fear as much anymore. You'll know how strong you are. You'll know what you're capable of. You won't have to prove it to anyone because everyone will be able to see it for themselves.

Before you can get that far, though, you first have to get through the pain. The worst thing is that your self-esteem takes the brunt of the initial shock. Someone going through a crisis rarely feels enthusiastic or has that get-up-and-go energy, because lack of self-esteem allows anger and sadness, disappointment and dismay to take over too easily. First your wounds need to heal before you can think about a new life. For some, the healing process takes many years.

It takes time to regenerate and it takes hope and courage to believe that things will get better. But it helps to know that you're not alone and there are others who understand what you're going through, especially when it feels like there are new surprises coming at you every second.

Story I

All it took was a second for my friend Sarah's life to change completely. She had just turned thirty-three, gotten married, and given birth to a healthy baby boy in Cologne, when life knocked her down. I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in London and my phone rang. I jumped out of bed and listened as my distraught friend told me, "My dad's dead. He shot himself. He just got up and shot himself."

Sarah wasn't prepared for this "brutal act," as she later described it. Her entire existence seemed to waver. She developed extreme anxiety and pain. She searched for answers that her father could no longer give. But

Sarah was smart and courageous; she never stopped asking for help. Many people in her situation wouldn't have been able to function, but she kept at it. She had to work through her anxiety because there was simply no other solution. And she did it. It took a long time, though, because at the beginning she tried to do too much all by herself.

More than a decade has passed since then and when we met again in Berlin in 2012, a strong, beautiful, and wise woman stood before me, a woman who wanted to share what she had learned from her fear and how she was able to strengthen her marriage, raise two happy and healthy kids, and leave her fear behind. Here is her story.

I Wanted the World to Stand Still for My Father

The police inspected my parents' house. Two, later three, men in uniform went through every nook and cranny, hoping to find clues to what had happened. They asked questions: "Did your father have any enemies? What was your relationship with him like? Could someone have murdered him?" And my poor mother, sitting distraught at the table in her salmon-colored sweatshirt and her freshly done-up hair, struggled for answers. "Were you having marital problems? Where were you when it happened?" "Where were you when your spouse suddenly decided to shoot himself with a shotgun?" Did they really ask her that? The situation was horrible. Unreal. I had so many questions. Why did my father take his life so violently? At seventy years old? Why did he have a shotgun in the bedroom closet? Why did he have only one shell? How long had it been there? Why did he get up out of bed, go into the garden, and shoot himself there? Why didn't he leave a letter to say goodbye? Without any prior warning? My parents had been married for over forty years. How do you do something like that after that long?

My mother was watching television and heard nothing. She only found my father later, on the grass, blood all over. She told the police that my father had had a cold and she had just brought him a cup of tea in bed. My father's friend, who was also a dentist, added to the police record that my father had made a strange call to him a few hours before his suicide. My father had said that "He wanted to think it over again, the thing with the implants."

I didn't understand.

Since my mother's call I'd basically been in shock. When she said to me that "Papa did something really, really bad," I'd immediately thought, "Is he dead?" And then Ben and I were sitting in our car, on the way to Münster, to my mother. Ben drove. He was very quiet. Tears were running down his face. I was holding Tim, our baby boy, on my lap. He was nine months old.

I couldn't cry. I felt horrible, like a total failure. I'd always called my parents. Every day. Except that day. That day I just didn't feel like it. I thought, "Sarah, you have your own family. You don't need to call your parents every day anymore." Could I have prevented my father's suicide? Why did he do this to us?

The quiet in the car was unbearable. I had to do something. Anything besides just sitting there passively. So I called everybody. Everyone that I knew. It was late in the evening. Some people I interrupted eating dinner and others I woke up. But I had to tell as many people as I could, over and over again. I had to keep reminding myself that it had actually happened.

More than anything, I wanted the world to stand still for my father.

I wanted the world to mourn.

For just that moment. To acknowledge my father.

Why did I have to go through this? It's bad enough when a parent dies from a natural death. But suicide! It threw me into a totally different dimension. It was an act of such extreme brutality, and yet my father had

always been a peaceful and friendly person.

I searched my parents' house for answers. I looked everywhere. All the first night, then the next day, and that night. I found nothing. Nothing in the attic, the cabinets, the bedroom, the drawers--no message, no note. Nowhere. His slippers were in the hall. Everything looked like he would walk in through the door at any moment. I thought I'd gone crazy.

How could I understand what my father did? Maybe the solution was in the garden. In the middle of the night I went out to the spot where he had shot himself. I lay down exactly where he'd been. That's when the tears started to flow. I began to cry, from the pain. I must have cried for a long time, until Ben couldn't take it anymore and brought me back inside.

An autopsy was performed. It was important to rule out any third-party involvement. The neighbors visited. Relatives. The pastor. The funeral home needed my father's birth certificate. So for the first time we opened my father's safe. There was a letter from him, undated. Part of it read, "I came quietly into this world and I will leave it quietly, too." He thanked us for all the wonderful times we had together and expressed his wishes for a very small funeral. That was it. Nothing personal, no reason for his decision. Nothing that made his departure in any way more bearable or understandable. I was disappointed.

My mother and I respected only some of his wishes. We decided not to print an announcement, for instance. But we wanted to say a proper farewell. I'm sure he wouldn't have objected to that.

Then my father's body was brought back to the house from the morgue. An undertaker in a clean, smart suit brought his body into the house, through the long hallway, and over the rug to the fireplace in our living room. The place we had always celebrated Christmas. The place we always associated with happy moments. Had he really been happy then? He had our farm, which had been in the family for four-hundred years. He had a wife who had been with him through thick and thin for forty years. He had a grown daughter who had been married for a year and given him a healthy grandson. He wasn't suffering from any life-threatening diseases. What had gone wrong?

The undertaker opened the coffin. There he was. My father. I looked at him very closely, at the many scars and stitches that the autopsy had left. I thought, "He looks like my father, just as I know him. Knew him." Very peaceful. But his soul was no longer there. "You've let me go. And now I let you go," were my words of farewell.

For the next three months I stayed with my mother. After the funeral Ben had driven back to Cologne for work, so he came to see me on the weekends. And the rest of us? My mother, Tim, and I were now alone. Some days my mother didn't say a single word all day. We often didn't eat anything. Didn't sleep. We searched, each for ourselves, completely desperate for an explanation. I felt so lonely, lost, like an orphan. The only time my mom showed any reaction was when I broke a plate on the kitchen floor and she snapped at me, "Why are you still here?" It was like she was trying to get back to life as it had been.

It helped that we had paperwork to take care of--pension, will, bank statements, and so on. My father had always taken care of all that. My mother had to relearn everything, at seventy years old. We both suffered from insomnia, despair, and anxiety. The family doctor gave us antianxiety pills so that we could sleep. Luckily Tim was with us. He had to eat, so I had to prepare food and that made me eat too. He would want to go for walks, so we would go outside and get some fresh air. He needed his mother's love, which I gave him unconditionally. When I look back at that time, my mother and I have a lot to thank him for.

The closer the time came to my departure for Cologne, the more my panic grew. I couldn't just leave my mother there, on the farm, alone. But what was the right thing to do? I went to talk to our pastor. He knew our whole family and he made the situation very clear very quickly. He said, "Sarah, you have your life and your mother has hers. You have a husband and a son who both need you. That's your family. That's where

you belong.” Those were very clear words and they showed me which direction to go. I am still thankful to him today for that.

In Cologne I had to make practical arrangements for everything. For example, we replaced our fancy car with a family car. It gave us flexibility so we could drive my mother back and forth. I worked so that I didn't have to think about things. But I noticed that I was completely broken, exhausted. Physically and mentally I had pushed myself to the limit.

The Acute Crisis Followed by the Deep Life Crisis

The summer of 2003 was a very hot one. Blue sky, happy faces everywhere, and sunshine. Every day the damn sun. I thought I was burning in hell.

Then we had the first Christmas celebration without my father. My mother wilted and I did too. Ben had to do everything. I started to withdraw from him emotionally as well as from my friends. They wanted to take me out and cheer me up but I'd start feeling sick after only two glasses of wine. Everything was toxic for my body, threw me off track. So I stopped going out. Ben rolled me a joint. It made me throw up.

What was good for me was my son. The profound love between me and my child didn't change during this time. Memories from my own childhood came to the surface. I don't know how many times my father had told me about how I would inherit the farm. “Sarah,” he would say, “one day all this will be left to you and it won't be easy to manage.” At home everything had always been a struggle. As a kid and later as a teenager and young woman, I thought that it didn't have to be that way, that it must get easier at some point.

As a kid, you notice when times are hard for your parents. I always had the feeling that my father needed a burden taken off his back. But I didn't know how to do that or what the burden was. And whenever I made an attempt to get close to him, he'd wave me away and suddenly he'd be happy. Later, as a student, I forgot what worry felt like. But after my father's death it came back full force. Almost as if such an ending had always been awaiting me.

The Crisis Reaches Its Peak

Time passed and I had an increasingly difficult time handling daily life. My guilt about leaving my mother alone at the farm, worry about the inheritance, anger at my father, and despair because I couldn't save him all made me sick. Then came the creeping sense of powerlessness, that I couldn't do my part as wife or mother or daughter. Inside I was completely torn up. Once I took my fist and put it through our house's glass door. At least then there was a mark--a wound, blood. I had replaced my mental pain with physical pain. And Ben again raced home from work. He took me right to the emergency room. I still have the scars today. There was no other choice: I needed help. My family doctor prescribed me an antidepressant and psychotherapy. What a disaster! The first therapist suggested that I arrange pictures of my family and spend a whole weekend in proper mourning. I didn't try his idea of mourning because I was too wrapped up in everyday life. The next therapist, well, at least I saw her five times instead of just once. She had been a psychiatrist for many years in private practice in Zurich. She sounded so impressive that I thought surely she could help. Unfortunately she had already seen and heard so many horror stories that she didn't take my problems seriously.

I couldn't really talk about my anxiety with my friends. I didn't want to sound like I was always complaining. The sadness had become an immovable depression. Often I lay apathetic in bed, barely able to move. Sometimes I thought, “Sarah, these feelings are coming right from your father so you can better understand how he felt.” I was convinced that he had suffered from depression his whole life.

The only one who was always there during this time was Ben. He had to put up with a lot. We had gotten married only a year before, and I was so sorry that our world had turned upside down and that I had changed into such an unpredictable mess. I became mistrustful and jealous, and I started to try to control him. Suddenly I wanted to always know exactly where he was, what he was doing, and who he was with.

The Turning Point

I had yet to find a solution for my problems. I still needed help from an expert who would take me seriously. After my family doctor and then the psychotherapists, I went to an alternative medicine practitioner. He suggested, "You need to run, run, run. Every day if possible." I told him that maybe I could run twice a week, but not every day because I couldn't handle that physically. He said, "Then buy some astronaut food. That will give you strength." So I did, and I bought some calming drops too. But I still couldn't run more than twice a week.

I read books about suicide, abandonment, counseling, spirituality, and how to deal with depression. I ran, as I said, twice a week, and made sure that I always kept myself busy vacuuming out the car, helping other mothers with their kids, and so on. I could only take things one day at a time.

I took Tim to play dates and to children's services at church. In Cologne I found a self-help group for family members of those who had committed suicide. They talked to me very plainly and told me everything I was feeling was normal. That my life was a total roller-coaster ride and had been for almost a year. They told me tranquilizers would help. My family doctor prescribed them for me.

I tried a thousand different things. Everything seemed to help somewhat. At least for a little while.

Something that had a real effect was the weekend seminar by the self-help group. My friends were always giving me flyers and books, but I never looked at them. It took me three years before I signed up to go to the group. First the group leader had two one-on-one talks with me. Then I went to group sessions. The group was made up almost entirely of women. And everyone's story was a tragedy. At first I envied those who had not been so surprised by the suicide of their family member, maybe because the family member had been severely depressed or very sick. But I quickly figured out that it hadn't been any better for them. They had tried just as unsuccessfully to save their family member but over a longer period of time.

After attending the self-help group, I felt for the first time in three years that I wasn't alone and that everything could've been so much worse. That made me less angry. I said to myself that I could have lost my father much earlier. After all, I was already thirty-three when he went.

After maternity leave, I started to work again, half days. That meant I had a relatively fixed schedule. In the morning I took Tim to preschool then went to work, in the afternoon I picked up Tim and did housework, and in the evening Ben would come home. The fixed routine probably helped me psychologically. Things started going better.

My Relapse

I got pregnant for the second time. Ben and I wanted another baby, and so Lilly was, like Tim, a planned child. It was, again, a very hot summer. Ben had come back from a job in India just before the baby was born and he completely fell apart because he was sick. I came back exhausted from the hospital with our baby. And I felt abandoned by the world. Not only by my father, who had left without a word, and by my mother, who I hadn't been able to talk to for a long time, but also by my husband. That was too much for me. I was on the hamster wheel of anxiety all over again.



Learning to Cope

I went to the next round of psychotherapy. This time I wanted an experienced therapist. And this time I was determined to stick with it. That led to my breakthrough. The new psychotherapist explained to me very clearly how the fear of abandonment works. The fear causes you to act in a way that repels people. That pushes away those you actually want so much to keep close. The same thing happens with children. If you are afraid that they might reject your love, that fear will make it more likely to happen.

We broke through this unconscious behavior together. First the therapist worked with me, then Ben and I worked together. I learned a lot through those conversations. More than anything, I learned that I had to find meaning in my life again. I had to ask myself how I really wanted to structure my everyday life and to find out what I can do, where I want to go, and what would make me happy.

My father's suicide, I now understood four years later, had set off an avalanche of feelings. Depression, of course, but also fear of abandonment, loss of trust, fear of the future, fear of my inheritance, and fear of the farm. I had been carrying around one big package of negativity.

The Healing Begins

After a few months of therapy I understood myself and my surroundings much better. I could once again view things realistically--even Ben's fears. I understood how difficult it was for him to provide for two children and a partly crazy wife all by himself. I understood that he was also feeling lonely and misunderstood.

My therapist helped me define a kind of controlled language and how I could use it to get a different job within my company. I simply wanted a regular work schedule, and I got it.

A house became available next door and we bought it. This commitment was a testament to our love because now we had a new joint project. Ben was so happy to see me feeling better that he gave me a ring with a beautiful inscription: "my love."

I stopped going to therapy after about eight months. I was doing well. My daily routine was working: in the morning we went to work, in the afternoon our house was full of kids, and in the evening it was husband-and-me time.

I hardly had any anxiety anymore.

Of course, whenever I think about the farm or my mother, the issues come back with full force. My father's will settled nothing. Inevitably there are disputes. I wanted to use my inheritance to pay for our new house, but my mother immediately worried that there wouldn't be enough for her in her old age and that her well-being would once again be in danger. Now we've settled it in writing, along with what she expects and where she wants to live in her old age. "Under no circumstances with you," she told me. She'd rather live in the retirement home where her twin sister is. And my inheritance? We've rented out the farm, so there's little for me to do and we can stay in Cologne. This is my home.

My crisis, in its different phases, lasted nine years. The crucial ingredients for my healing were:

* Understanding things. You need to find experts that have a professional approach to your problems. Self-help groups are actually very good. The group members know where you're coming from and what you're talking about, and you'll hear people like me talk about their experiences. They have addresses, links, reading material, and advice on what has helped them and what you can do. I also had to find the courage to say no to help that didn't do me any good. That included saying no to the first two psychotherapists, the worship

services, and going out with friends.

* Approaching the subject of suicide. It took, I think, almost two years before I understood that someone doesn't plan a suicide overnight. That someone struggles with it, shifts the time when he or she plans to commit the act, and rethinks the situation. Today I am sure that my father stayed with us much longer than he originally thought he would. Without us, and also without his mother, who was over ninety years old when she died shortly before he did, he wouldn't have lived as long. For him--in his world--there was nothing left to do: his daughter was married, he had a healthy grandson, his wife was financially secure, and his mother was gone. He could finally let go.

* Being taken seriously. For many years I had the feeling that nobody understood me. Most people treated me like, "She's thirty-three. Her father killed himself. What's the problem?" I didn't want to have to justify myself or to feel ashamed; I wanted help. Just overcoming the initial shock takes time. Who knows how long it will take each person? I needed a whole year. Every time the telephone rang, I thought, "Oh God, something else has happened." Even when it didn't ring, I often blamed myself. For instance, why didn't I call my parents on that one day of all days? Could I have prevented his suicide?

* A role model or coach. Our pastor, who knew me from when I was a young girl and was close to my parents, was an enormous help. He did more for me in two conversations than four sessions with a psychiatrist. Because my problems involved core emotional issues that were already there but had been lost in the chaos of the crisis, I needed someone who would say to me, "Sarah, these are your tasks, and this is what you need to do right now." Our pastor said what I actually already knew. He told me, "You are a grown-up; you have your own family. You must let go. Your mother must find her own way. And you also." But it wasn't that easy, of course. Every time my mother didn't pick up the phone, I anxiously called the neighbor and asked him to check if everything was okay. I was imagining that he would enter the house and find her dead of a broken heart. I couldn't let go for very long.

* Talking, being open. The first conversations on how to move forward were difficult. So many emotions and fears came to the surface. My mother didn't know whether she wanted to stay in that big house on the farm. We offered to rent an apartment in Cologne opposite ours. That would be an absolute nightmare, she told us. On top of that, her dream of growing old with my father was suddenly gone. So we had to work around all that. In my marriage, we both tried to keep the channels of communication open. Sometimes that didn't work. Sometimes you have to let go so that you don't overburden your partner. I think transparency and honesty, empathy and love can also be lifesavers. If you stop talking with each other, first you'll lose trust and then later much more.

* Searching and trying. If something doesn't help at first, keep trying! Try something else. Be open to advice from coworkers, friends, even strangers. It took me three years to go to the self-help group weekend seminar. I should have done it much earlier! For the most part I've tried and failed at a lot of things. But that's okay.

I am a seeker. I look for earmuffs for Tim or the bicycle helmet for Lilly. Every morning I look for my cell phone. I search for the truth. I search for a solution. Every day.

* Keeping at it. Now I'm in therapy again. I've recognized that every few years I simply need a coach to get me back on track. An expert who can help me reprioritize when my life gets out of balance.

What I've Learned

Get professional help early. It can be exhausting as a patient in a public health care system. If you don't have an acute case, you often have to wait for up to six months for an appointment, unless you have enough



money to pay for a private therapist.

If nothing else eases the pain, ask a doctor to prescribe medication, such as tranquilizers. Some people are afraid that they'll become addicted; don't be. If you've got to cross a huge mountain and you're barefoot, first you need to get some shoes. The mountain won't get any smaller, but the journey will be less painful. Your search for help will take courage and some luck. You'll probably also meet some people who are wrong for you. Forget about them.

Self-help groups are good. At the beginning I had rejected them because I thought that all people did was sit around, wallowing in their self-pity. That's what I had always read. Normally you can find a group on the Internet or through a charity or social service ministry. Churches or your family doctor also have information. People pass through different stages in a crisis and its aftermath. There will be setbacks. Don't give up. Talk to your parents about their old age. My father had so much fear about old age that we never talked about it. You've got to break through this fear. Parents age and then die, that's just part of life. One question is enough--what do you think your old age will be like? If you have a family business, be clear about what should happen with it. Make advance directives. You've got to communicate. That's what I've learned, and I hope I can pass that on to my kids.

The most important thing in a crisis: you must keep meeting your basic needs, such as sleeping and eating. If you can't, you need to get help from a doctor or alternative medicine practitioner.

Don't just give up when there are setbacks.

Take things in moderation, don't overdo it. Have one or two glasses of wine at night, not the whole bottle. Work, yes, but not twelve-hour days. Don't do nothing.

My love for my children kept me going in the darkest hours, along with maybe even a little love for myself. But I'm not sure about that last part.

My Life Today

I have a friendlier attitude toward life. I would like to move my career more toward psychology and go back to school. I find human breakdowns fascinating but what I find even more fascinating is how people overcome them and find connection. My greatest achievement is that I barely have any anxiety anymore. I feel good.

My Suggestions

It will get better. Believe that.

Ignore pressure and time. Grief isn't like getting over a cold. You'll go up and down. It's a process. One person might need a few months, someone else twenty years. But no matter how bad it is, the pain will get better.

Summary

In Latin, resilience means "to rebound." Let worry and fear bounce off of you like raindrops off a waterproof jacket. Resilience is the secret to happiness.

Don't waste your energy covering up, denying, or repressing mistakes that you've made. Stand tall. Save your energy and concentrate on what's important.

Sarah tells us it will get better. Believe her. Ignore time and pressure. Overcoming a crisis will take as long as

it takes.

Someone who has found the way out of darkness back into the light will no longer be as afraid of the dark. Always remember that.

Chapter 2

WHEREVER FEAR IS, THAT'S THE WAY TO GO

It was 1777, before the turmoil of the French Revolution, when Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin¹⁷ saw the light of day. She was born into the comforts of a wealthy cloth merchant family in Reims. She married François, the son of a wealthy neighbor who was also a successful cloth merchant. Young Monsieur Clicquot's passions, however, extended more toward the wine trade. "Wines of particular quality had always been grown on the slopes of the mountains in the Marne Valley. Marketing these both within and outside France became their venture and a new line of business that the young couple dedicated themselves to with all their energy."¹⁸ After six years of marriage, François died from typhoid fever, which was a widespread disease at that time, and the 27-year-old Madame Clicquot-Ponsardin became the widow "Veuve Clicquot-Ponsardin." With a small daughter and the wine business developing problems, she was all alone. She was afraid. But what else was there for her to do but continue doing the plan the couple had agreed to? "I don't even have an education in business!" What she did have, however, were her courage, her determination, and her intelligence.

The young widow decided, "after months of self-doubt and secret fears"¹⁹ to continue running the company herself. She invested her "entire family's fortunes into a risky venture and thus also put her independence on the line."²⁰ Converted into today's money, it involved around 1.1 million dollars. Her father-in-law added another half a million. That was the start of her rise to becoming the first major businesswoman in Europe. A big business that profited from her daringness more than anything else.

"In the same year, 110,000 bottles of champagne were shipped. In 1810 she created the first Vintage wine to be produced in Champagne. She ignored the European continental embargo and shipped her wines to St. Petersburg. Her champagne received a triumphant welcome in Russia: important men, such as Pushkin, Chekhov, and Gogol, praised it. 1816 she invented a new method for producing champagne: the riddling table, which continues to be used today for ensuring a crystal-clear champagne."²¹

She was the first businessperson to employ outside managers and not just turn to family members, which proved to be an extremely successful and groundbreaking idea for the general business culture of the future.

Madame Clicquot made a deliberate decision to never remarry, because it provided her more flexibility. At that time, a married businesswoman led a rather shadowy existence – but as a widow she could make her own decisions. She refused to be intimidated by her many setbacks and held steadfast to her plans. She was resourceful. She set new standards. The times were anything but helpful for establishing a business involving international trade. The Napoleonic wars, political upheavals, and trade barriers, accompanied by miserable grape harvests in the area around Reims now known as Champagne, set nearly impossible tasks for Madame Veuve Clicquot, who was later addressed as "grande dame." Ultimately she mastered these problems with her own foresight, her courage in taking risks, and her tireless work ethic. In Russia and in England, her champagne was legendary, and she earned a considerable fortune there. This she invested, in turn, in new



vineyards; she acquired estates and castles and had access to the highest circles of nobility.

What began here was to become one of the greatest female business careers of all time. And by expanding her wine production into a revolutionary champagne production from then on, the widow Clicquot became one of the richest women in the world.

Concentrate on what you can, and not on what you can't!

Dale Carnegie, the American motivational writer and communications trainer, once said: "Do the thing you fear to do and keep on doing it... that is the quickest and surest way ever yet discovered to conquer fear." Carnegie knew: "Worrying and being afraid – those are the biggest problems of mankind." That's still as true today as it was then.

Worldwide, fear drives 121 million people into depression – people living in countries with high average incomes are especially affected.²² The leader is France; in China, people have much better mental health. Just in Germany, four million people suffer from depression. According to Statista²³, the statistics portal, the greatest fear among Germans is the rising cost of living, followed by natural catastrophes.

Fear does strange things to people. Fear can make us freeze up. Fear can make us sick. We essentially become prisoners to our own negative thinking. The things we tell ourselves we can't do, we won't be able to do. This is the vicious circle of fear that we get trapped in. It paralyzes us. But just as we can talk ourselves into fear, we can also talk ourselves back out of fear. We need to observe ourselves in stillness and calm and, like the physicist Marie Curie recognized: "Nothing in life is to be feared, only to be understood."

The American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said: "Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world."

This fear can overtake individuals, it can overtake groups, it can paralyze and terrorize entire countries. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author and philosopher, wrote about the suppression of the Indian population by the British East India Company in his "Letter to a Hindu"²⁴: "A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean. What does it mean that thirty thousand men, not athletes but rather weak and ordinary people, have subdued two hundred million vigorous, clever, capable, and freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indians who have enslaved themselves?" A young Indian, who was deeply influenced by Tolstoy's letter, was Mohandas K. Gandhi. Gandhi understood early on "the importance of a change of will as a prerequisite for a change in patterns of obedience and cooperation. There was a need for (1) a psychological change away from passive submission to self-respect and courage, (2) recognition by the subject that his assistance makes the regime possible and (3) the building of a determination to withdraw cooperation and obedience." Gandhi knew "the moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states. Therefore, the first thing is to say to yourself: 'I shall no longer accept the role of a slave. I shall not obey orders as such but shall disobey them when they are in conflict with my conscience.'"

"The moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall."



Harvard professor and philosopher William James believed that “The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives.”²⁵

Sometimes, when life explodes in your face, this awareness tends to get lost. We need it now more than ever. It’s important to understand your own fear in order to deal with it. Slow down! Take one thing at a time. If you can understand your own fear, where it’s coming from, what it wants from you, and what it’s holding you back from, then you can also overcome it. This is not art or magic, just hard work. No more. Karl Popper, one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, devoted his last work to this realization: “All Life is Problem Solving.” ²⁶

We must work on ourselves like on a house. Maybe over the years the roof has fallen into disrepair, but maybe there was something wrong with the foundation right from the start – that happens! It’s ok. Accept it. Every house needs maintenance; sometimes a lot, sometimes only a little. Take a calm, quiet look at your house, your life. When you find out what needs to be done, correct the problem. Look for support. Under no circumstances do it alone. Ask for help from those who know and understand your problem. That’s what every successful crisis manager does.

As a young man, Warren Buffett, the most successful big investor of the 20th century, had already figured out what he’d have to do to get what he wanted: He’d have to face his fears. At the age of 21 he had a talent for investing, but unfortunately he wasn’t a good communicator. He told the magazine *Levo League* that he was “absolutely terrified of public speaking.”²⁷ He had such a fear of it that he picked his college courses so that he could play it safe and not speak in front of an audience. Once he registered for a class on rhetoric – but didn’t go: “I didn’t have the courage.” Then he enrolled in a Dale Carnegie course for public speaking. “I became associated with the 30 other people in the class. We couldn’t stand up in front of a group and say our own name.” This seminar was his breakthrough. Asked about the cornerstones of his success, he answered: “You need to be able to communicate in life. That is extremely important. Schools undervalue that somewhat. If you can’t communicate and talk to other people to tell them your ideas, you’re giving up your potential.”

Face your fear.

Setting hope over fear is something that helped drive a young boy named Barack Hussein Obama to become president. In even the most devastating situations, he believed in hope and hard work and the idea that, in the USA, everyone, no matter where they start, has a chance to fulfill his or her own dream and that every American has a right to an education and health care. Hope is an immensely powerful motivator: regardless of whether you want to fight off an illness or become an Olympic champion. Hope brings positive thoughts. Hope lets you breathe between all the setbacks. Hope makes it possible for us to keep going. Hope inspires new ideas and courage. Hope helps when nothing else does.

We’re all looking for answers and many of us will look for our entire lives.

The search starts when we’re young and have our own first independent thoughts and it continues even when we’re on our deathbeds. Why is my love not returned? Why do I not have the courage to follow my life’s

dream? Why have I gotten so sick? Where did my anger and discontent come from? Why am I so afraid? Why did those things happen to me? All of these questions are universal. The answers to them are specific to the individual. Nobody can serve you the answers on a silver platter. You can be helped along your path by suggestions and support, but you have to make your own way on your search for your own answers. And you have to want to do it – that is the most important step. If you don't want to learn something, nobody else can force you to do it. You alone are the key. You'll be able to let go of your fears and worries only when you learn and understand their causes and when you understand the interdependence of your life as part of something larger than yourself. The crisis is there because you have looked the other way for too long. Now you need to lean in. Now you need to look inward. Now you need to learn. Be open to learning. Practice understanding. If you cannot rein in and calm your fears, they will never leave your side. You will become weaker. And over time new worries and crises will arrive. One on top of the other. Is that what you want? You know deep down that you're much stronger than this pile of misery that exists during the energy-draining crisis. Trust the words of Marianne Williamson: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."

STORY II

My next journey took me to Hamburg; I visited Maximilian, a successful writer. For decades he'd been fighting against his own demons. His whole life seemed like one long series of crises. At the age of 50 he'd suddenly had enough – for the first time he said no. He banished all falsehood from his life. He freed himself from the shackles of fear, of rejection, of not being loved, of lies. Maximilian leaned into all of his fears and changed his point of view and direction: toward inner peace and inner strength. The spark for this long struggle was a family secret that he'd unearthed as a teenager – a secret that had changed the whole direction of his life...

WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

I was 14 years old and did what probably many boys at my age did when their parents weren't at home. First I secretly smoked a cigarette and then I started poking around. My favorite place to look through was my father's office. My father, however, was very sensitive to such things, which only made this forbidden act more exciting. The books and manuscripts on his desk didn't particularly interest me. I leafed through his notepad a little and the papers that were lying around. Of course I looked in the drawers. But what was it that I was really looking for? With some disappointment I opened his cabinet where he kept folders of his old papers. One of the folders was labeled "Adoption." I thought it was strange that I'd never seen that before. And moments later I was staring at my birth certificate. And right behind it – my adoption record!

I think my heart stopped beating.

I didn't move. With eyes wide open I stared at this paper; I tried to read, to comprehend, the words, over and over. The letters became blurry. I couldn't figure out what it meant. But it felt as if my life had just dropped into a deep hole. I'm not Maximilian? What? My name is Andreas? I was born in Munich, not in Hamburg? My father is not my father? My real father is an Italian? My mother is not my mother, either? My biological mother's name is Carin?

I couldn't take in any more. Shaking I put the folder back in its place. Nobody could know that I had been there. Then I quickly left the room. To go somewhere, anywhere.

That night, at dinner with my parents, I didn't say a word. I could hardly dare to look at them – my parents. They weren't even my real parents! But if they weren't my parents, what are they? I said nothing. The next day I said nothing, too, and for weeks and months. I kept everything in. I kept thinking "What should I do now? What should I say and how should I say it and to whom?" I'd found out the big secret by secretly poking around the house. How could I keep going? If my parents weren't my parents, what then was still true? Why hadn't anyone talked to me about this? I was depressed and groped around as if in a fog. I'd been hurt to the core and I was angry. Above all I was desperate for answers. But I didn't find any.

Wasn't life alright up until then?

Adolescence hadn't really started for me yet. I was an only child, very good in school. At five and a half years old I could read and write and also do some math. So I was put right into second grade. I was very well-behaved, a nice boy with a lot of friends. Here, in our house, a little outside of Hamburg, we lived with my grandparents all under the same roof. Very cozy. Someone was always there. We didn't have any money problems. My father was a very successful journalist; my mother was able to stay at home.

But what of that life was really true?

I entrusted my secret to my best friend. Of course only after she swore to secrecy. But she pretty quickly told her parents and her parents in turn told my mother. At some point we found ourselves in the strange situation that my mother knew that I knew. She also knew that I knew that she knew. But nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. Nothing at all. Nobody spoke with me about it. Never. They simply never said anything about it. Game. Set. Match.

In my teenage brain I tried to make sense of everything. Maybe I was repressing some memory or my imagination had added things through the years. But as a small child I often had the feeling that I didn't belong in this family. I felt like these parents just couldn't be mine. That they weren't letting me in on something and maybe I thought of it as some kind of breach of trust in my subconsciousness. Maybe I even felt like I was being deceived.

What remained was a giant hole. And the hole started filling up. With many, many crises; one right after the other. Actually, if I'm honest, since that day I've only known crises. As a grown man, in my early 30s, that's when I started to work on things. It took until I was 50. Only today can I say that I've freed myself from all that, that I'm finally doing ok. I looked my fears right in the eyes and finally let go of every individual hurt.

At 14, I tried different things to figure out my identity. Adolescence came on really quickly and I looked for an outlet. Smoking was a good start. Just to be like the other boys, especially the older boys.

I completely slacked off in school. Was held back. It was as if Maximilian, the model student, had been replaced by Andreas, the rebel. My father was beside himself. He was a strong character, liberal, intellectual through and through. When I was eight years old, he asked me if I wanted to go with him to documenta [an exhibition of modern and contemporary art held every five years in Kassel]. I didn't even know what it was and told him "no, not really." He gave me his strict look followed by "OK, if you want to remain stupid."

I became fascinated with gambling. On slot machines. That turned out to be much worse for my development



than smoking or bad grades.

Casinos were off limits. But there was this new arcade that was part of a convenience store called Harry's. It was catty-corner from the deli where my mother always shopped. It was so exciting because it was forbidden. I didn't get very much spending money but here you could turn 5 marks into 150. Before, when I would go to an HSV soccer match, I could pay for the ticket, but I wouldn't have enough to get a bratwurst. Gambling changed all that. Sometimes, to get money for playing, I would go shopping for my mother and then I'd keep five marks or more.

Because I was held back in school, my parents moved me to the school in the neighboring town. I immediately became class representative. I was funny, a natural entertainer, and daring, which also had an effect on my gambling. Gambling changes you. You start manipulating people to get money. First others. Then yourself.

Luckily I did well in high school. Definitely a credit to the new teachers who were now teaching at our school. They were more compassionate and liberal. The old fossilized Nazi-type teachers were leaving one after the other for biological reasons.

At university I registered for political science and law. I thought with those studies I could become anything from taxi driver to chancellor of Germany. But I hated my student years. Everything, the undisciplined behavior of the students, the pseudointellectual nonsense. And those lectures. Given by boring guys who smelled of unwashed wool sweaters. After three semesters I had earned three credits and had no idea how I had gotten to where I was.

I ran away.

I tried all the slot machines in and around the university. Those were my relaxing moments; I could zone out. I could escape real life and even win some money, too.

Because I had a talent for writing, I decided to become a journalist. My father, who was a big name in publishing in Hamburg, didn't like my plan, probably he didn't believe me. While he was on vacation I applied to journalism school and was accepted.

Moments of happiness

The training course was exactly right for me. My third internship assignment in the journalism school was at RTL in Luxembourg. It had been broadcasting for a year. Everything was interesting and still under construction. Four days after my internship ended, I was hired as a sports reporter for 4000 marks. Six months later I started getting 5000 marks. In the meantime I had married my childhood sweetheart and we were living together there. We were happy.

Luxembourg did have a casino, but I didn't have the time or the interest to play. But every time I came back to Germany for a visit, my first action was always: straight to the slot machines!

While RTL was moving from Luxemburg to Cologne, my father pressured me to accept an offer in Hamburg. My mother had gotten very sick and my wife was expecting our second child. Picking security seemed the



right choice. What a mistake! I had completely ignored the fact that I was happy with my work in television and my life. As if that didn't play any part at all. Nobody cared. Instead I was now back in Hamburg and writing for this magazine that was total rubbish. After 22 issues it was discontinued.

I started gambling again more frequently.

Professionally things improved. I helped to build the first private television broadcaster in Hamburg. After that I became an editor and later managing director of several popular television shows in Cologne and Berlin. One show that I co-created at the beginning of the 90s is still running successfully today.

The job of journalist is very well suited to the life of a gambling addict. There are always conferences that are announced at short notice. Coming home late is normal. You get off the train at the train station, go to the casino for a little while, and then go home happy or not so happy. Nobody notices anything – you think. The first warning I got was from one of our managing directors. At the time we were producing a talk show in Hanseviertel. I didn't need the prep time and disappeared to the closest arcade. Just before recording I appeared back on the set. "We have a problem with you," he said. "Are you taking drugs? Are you an alcoholic?" Of course not! I lied. But his guess had hit the nail on the head: gambling is an addiction. And I was addicted.

In the first six or seven months, I gambled around 350,000 marks on slot machines. My father had to pay my debts three times. My annual income was between 240,000 and 280,000 marks a year. Somehow it was enough to cover everything and to maintain the status quo. And the banks were still giving credit at that time.

The next crack

After a few more moves, we ended up in Berlin. My wife Jenny and I lived in a very nice house in the country, our three kids were healthy. I was working like crazy at the time. Actually, I was really only at home on the weekends. We always had enough money, and somehow everything kept working out. Until the program that I was working on was canceled due to low ratings. The compensation was quite good and allowed us to pay off my debts of about 50,000 marks. An luckily, I got an offer to run the editorial office of a major broadcaster for 250,000.

But something happened that I wasn't prepared for: my wife decided, without consulting me, to take the kids and move back to Hamburg. She said she hated Berlin. Why did nobody include me in the decision-making? Did my thoughts mean nothing to them? Was this family a lie, too? Did nobody care that I was able to provide us with a nice life? Why was I always told things after they had already been decided? Why was I always the one who had to be flexible?

With this shock, I left to go gambling in Alexanderplatz. I won 100,000 marks! It felt good. But what should I do with the money? I didn't want to have to explain everything and justify myself again. So I took the money and opened a new bank account. My plan was to quickly pay off our various loans. It worked. Until my next round of gambling. One year later the account was empty and my debts had risen 30,000 marks higher.

A family hiding secrets, again?



I turned down the job in Berlin and moved to Hamburg to be with my family. I needed the love and security. Now back where I grew up, I worked as a freelancer and became successful at that too. I wrote 20 books, a pair of screenplays, and was also hired as a TV consultant. But the same questions kept coming up, beating me over the head like a hammer: Who are you actually living with? What are you doing? Why are you being blackmailed for your love? Life is a funny: You learn to know yourself and you fall in love with other people (later that includes children too). The circumstances change but not the person. I didn't have the courage to say: "Dear, there's a connection between our wealth and my absence."

My father took his own life.

He had cancer. One day after I'd taken him to the hospital, a nurse called me and said: "Your father's disappeared." I immediately went to his house. He was sitting in his chair, dead. He'd poisoned himself and put a bag over his head.

That incident brought back all of my childhood nightmares all over again. My mother had also been very sick until she decided in 1987 to leave this world. She put on her bathing suit, went down to the swimming pool, turned on the swimming machine and drowned herself. My father found her.

My father's mother was given an overdose of insulin by the family doctor because it no longer made sense to keep her alive. It was considered a socially acceptable death.

My mother's mother shot herself.

My father's brother was shot during the war as a deserter.

And so on.

Only my grandfather died a natural death at the age of 94.

I struggle

My father left us a good amount of money. I decided I'd use it to make good investments. For me, "good" meant preventing myself from gambling it all away. I also wanted to buy a rental property for later, for our old age. But my wife and her family and almost all our friends advised against it. Because of the tenants, the hassle, and so on. So we put the money into a house, more precisely, my parent's house, where we were living at the time. We had projects going on pretty much constantly, renovations and additions. But those were just an attempt to make up for something that was missing. Since our move from Berlin, my wife and I were just barely getting along. We hosted extravagant events anyway; friends came every weekend, and we held spontaneous parties until we dropped from exhaustion. We'd built three large patios and the throngs of guests could follow the sun from patio to patio. The wine cellar held 600 bottles; any hotel would have been delighted to have our designer kitchen. And then there were some serious discussions when I bought myself a motorcycle. Yeah, once upon a time I was very brave. I said to my wife: "You know, I pay 450 marks a month for our daughter's horse. My motorcycle only costs 139 marks. The horse only has 1 horsepower. My motorcycle has 86." We talked constantly about absolutely little everything until I couldn't take it anymore. Life continued like this for around ten years. For a long time I'd missed the feeling of physical intimacy. There



wasn't any warmth, trust, or appreciation in my marriage. My wife said: "Go marry the dog!" I said: "At least he loves me." I felt like I was being driven to adultery. I had an affair and it felt good. Then more affairs and I finally felt appreciated. Our family life went on. But it wasn't enough for me. I wanted so much more. More than anything, I wanted answers to my many questions. I wanted to know: who am I?

My search for my biological parents

My questions inevitably led me back to the past that I'd tried to block out for nearly twenty years. Nobody had talked with me about my adoption. Ever. And I didn't bring it up either. I was afraid of everything that would be revealed. But now I was finally ready to look my fear in the eyes.

I did some research and looked at my file at the youth welfare office in East Munich. My biological mother was just 18 years old when she gave birth to me in a Catholic village in Bavaria. I was born out of wedlock, of course. In the 1960s, that made her a persona non grata. Such things weren't tolerated back then; people just pretended they didn't happen. So she was forced to give me up for adoption. That's how her crisis began.

We met and understood each other very well.

My biological father? He's Italian. He worked in the Italian Ministry of Justice as a philologist. Later he became one of the most sought-after experts in the constructed language of Esperanto. My mother and father met by chance when she was a student and wanted to see the Strasbourg Cathedral. He'd taken a break from a meeting at the European Parliament and went to the cathedral too. Later I learned that he had married, had children, and became the head of the Italian Scientologists. His two sons joined the group too. Only his wife wasn't a part of it.

In the file I also found out the reason for my too-narrow nasal passages and ear canals. I have very poor hearing, despite my large ears, and my nose is always blocked up. The ear, nose, and throat doctors could never find an explanation. Now I finally know the reason. As a baby I was first placed with five different foster families. I cried a lot. To keep me quiet, the fifth family did something that today would probably be considered waterboarding, a kind of torture. Sick. One time when they were dunking my head into a metal wash tub with ice water, the police and someone from the youth welfare office came and took me back into state custody.

You have to know!

If you know these things, then you can try to understand them, put them in context, and overcome them. Now I began to see other connections too. Like when I was around four years old, I swung a you gun and and knocked four teeth out of a twelve-year-old girl's mouth. Can you imagine? Why did I do that? A couple of kids buried me in a pile of leaves and it scared me completely out of my mind. Probably reminded me of the waterboarding. In any case, I grabbed the first thing I could and swung wildly all around me. My father was very angry. He had to pay 2000 marks for pain and suffering, and the girl went around for five years with temporary teeth before she got a bridge that my father also paid for.

While I tried to put all the puzzle pieces together, I became somewhat quieter. I cried a lot at the time. It all



had to come out.

My gambling addiction

Also around this time, I decided that I wanted to stop gambling. I wanted to get something out of my life and thought that if I wrote a book about my experiences and explained how people could be sucked into this vicious circle of addiction, I could better understand my problem and maybe even get away from it. The book was first published anonymously and then later under my real name and has since become something of a textbook for addiction counselors. But my family didn't care what I'd written. And it damaged me professionally.

I continued to gamble.

When he's up, a gambler starts skimping on himself. If he comes from good circumstances and has a family, he'll try to keep the boat afloat. He has to work twice as much, because he spends twice as much. Money's the fuel that drives the engine. He has to keep up appearances and pay for everything: rent, cars, vacations, horses, luxury items, and so on. So he gambles even more. And he can do it, too, because the new gambling machine casinos let you gamble even faster.

It doesn't last long, because you get into a cycle of trying to make up for losses. The stakes get higher. Then you borrow money and fall into a downward spiral of guilt. A vicious circle of gambling, losing, and borrowing. At 15, 16 it was exciting because it was forbidden. You're doing something that others aren't. It's cool. You think that you're actually handling money in a healthy way. But gambling changes you. You fool yourself and you're constantly doing calculations with money that you don't actually have yet.

At the beginning, the gambler wins. It's true. He plays very carefully and wins. He stops at a few euros. But good luck at the beginning is ultimately bad luck for the gambler.

The other life, the next step in the catastrophe

The state of the economy was abysmal in 2004. I had to work three times as much to make the same amount. Suddenly there was no way for us to keep it up. So I grabbed for straws. With a friend, I took over the club house for our city's soccer and sports club. It was a killer success right away. I worked 16 hours a day. Every day. And I lost 50 pounds in three months.

Working in the bar left very little time for my family. During that time my wife built her own life. When I was at home, she was tired. She would party with her friends until two in the morning. Everything was very lax. I organized parties for our kids and hired a nanny. It was all crazy. We lived like millionaires. I knowingly walked right into a catastrophe. What's more, as a bar owner, you're burning both ends of the candle. You have 200 people in the bar, you're counting the money, the cash register is full, you feel great. We had a waitress at the clubhouse, who was my wife's friend. Like me, she was lonely. Well, then we were lonely together. My wife noticed something, called up her friend, and invited her to have coffee. But it wasn't a friendly get-together; it was an inquisition, an interrogation. It ended with the friend admitting to our affair. The rest of the story is short: the interrogation happened on December 20 and on January 5 I came home from work in the morning and our house was empty.



The downward spiral

We had been just a normal family, but now it was like we were characters in a soap opera. And right in the middle of a very messy divorce. I couldn't keep the house anymore; it had to be sold. When I look back on all the new furniture, patios, cars, I can see that I never said no. I'd felt that it was all just for show, but I never dared to say no. My wife took the first step by moving out.

We owed around 230,000 euros on the house. I didn't want the bank to foreclose on it and leave us with nothing but peanuts, so I sold it myself and got a half million. About 45,000 euros was left for me. The rest went to my wife. Using a very clever legal trick she was able to get me to pay for the kids' inheritance twice.

What did I do? I threw myself into my work. Again. I'd go to the store at 6 o'clock in the morning and then I'd go to work and clean the kitchen and cook until nighttime. Every day. My partner took advantage of my good nature and he'd come to work sometime around two. I hired two cooks and a trainee for our second bar at a tennis club.

Now I had crises as far as the eye could see: divorce, the sale of my parents' house, enormous financial losses, the bars, the tax authorities who suddenly wanted information from me and our company, and my relationship with my kids, somehow I had to find a way to keep going with my kids. To make matters worse, I fell in love with a woman who was totally deranged, a borderline personality case. She'd suddenly disappear for three days at a time, and then try to make me believe she felt bad about it. One time, after she'd done cocaine and was drunk on top of that, she smashed up her furniture. A nightmare. But I tried to save her.

At that time I was living in a duplex and had taken on some sub-tenants. I often thought, "Max, there's nothings of you left." It's strange, when you get into situations like that, it's like all you do is dig your hole deeper and deeper. You seem to just get involved with people who take advantage of you even more. I tried to keep being fair and decent, but my sub-tenants took advantage of me. If one of them couldn't pay, I didn't feel it was worth arguing over. Surely, I thought, he'd pay double rent the next month.

The last straw

In November 2009, some people had booked a big party in our clubhouse but they canceled. It would've brought in about 1800 euros and I was already counting on that money. I wanted to use it to buy Christmas presents for my kids. That's when the knots finally all came untied. At that moment, all I could think was: "Maximilian, what in the world are you doing with your life?" That was the last straw. I knew if I kept on going like that, everything would eventually collapse. There I was, in my crappy, rented house, having worked my butt off for years, and I had nothing to show for it. I needed help. Nothing was working anymore. The game was over.

I look for help

I wanted to know what was actually wrong with me, Why did I always wind up with the people I wound up with? I looked for a therapist. At first the therapist let me talk a lot. And, well, I'm very good at telling dramatic events in an entertaining way. After the sixth or seventh session, however, I reached a phase of reflection and sadness. The therapist did a good job of making me force myself to keep at it. I had to delve

into my past; I had to find my real self. Otherwise the downward spiral of self-delusion would continue and it was costing me way too much energy. I began to understand that, before, I was always trying to solve the same problems in the same way for the same kind of person, and then, for decades, I was always surprised when I got the same results.

After I understood that, it became clear to me that I was the only one who had the ability to change the direction of my life. I had always thought that other people dictated my life. That's wrong. I dictate my own life. I determine its direction. And to do that, all I need to do is trust in myself.

The turning point and the first step out of the crisis

A lawyer friend advised me that, given my financial situation, I should file for bankruptcy. And I did. The bar was a partnership and my partner and I had debts of 45,000 euros and 7000 euros, respectively. I applied for social welfare benefits.

The second, third, fourth... steps

I felt that I had to find myself. I wanted to finally do what I felt capable of and what my actual passion was: I wanted to be a writer again. After a call to the biggest newspaper in my city, I had a job. After three months I got a pretty good contract and was writing 80 big stories a year.

At the same time I left my unpredictable girlfriend with borderline personality disorder. That was the hardest step. I ended it only after I understood that my love for her was one-sided and I was just her punching bag. It was crazy hard for me, because I'd done everything for her. After the breakup I felt dead for four weeks. And then suddenly I was so much better. It was a breakthrough. I had finally done something right. A friend, a failed philosopher, who was previously a regular at my bar, wrote a book about relationships with people with borderline personality disorders. He had fallen for two women with the disorder. He could predict what was going to happen in my life as if he had a blueprint.

I had no place to stay. I was on the street until the end of 2009, when someone offered to let me stay with him. I slept on a couch in a small room at his place. We knew each other vaguely from the bar. He had done some cleaning and repairwork there every now and then because he couldn't find any work as an engineer.

The couch was in a small room at his place and I was storing my furniture cheaply with a mover whom I had once did a favor for. Sometimes when his two sons came for a visit I had to sleep on a mattress in the kitchen. During the day I was interviewing the mayor and then at night I was sleeping in the kitchen. It wasn't great. But I knew that I was on the right track.

I wanted my authenticity back. I took a personal inventory. I had to relearn how to understand things less with my mind and more with my heart.

I also looked for a new therapist. I had set out on a new path and I wanted to support my journey with professional guidance. To do that I needed help. And the therapy was good. A psychologist classified me as non-treatable but at least I wasn't ignoring my problems anymore. After a few sessions, it became clear to both of us what was wrong with me: I was depressed. This diagnosis helped me a lot. It was concrete. After everything I'd gone through, I could now understand my behavior better. It took quite a weight off me. The

weight of ignorance and uncertainty. The weight of always feeling like I was groping around in the dark and never knowing why. Since the diagnosis things have gotten better. It helped me loosen the stranglehold and then later completely get rid of many things, a lot of pain and even my addiction. I had an explanation for my behavior. I no longer needed to gamble. Suddenly I could say no. I was also no longer afraid of loss because I could deal with its consequences. I knew I could make it through anything.

Two books were crucial for me during this period. The first was Josef Kirschner's "The Art of Being an Egoist" and the second was "Stalking the Soul," a book about borderline personality disorders by the French psychoanalyst Marie-France Hirigoyen. I came to understand a lot from reading those books. For example, about the criminal streak that these people have, their kind of perfect manipulation, and why they're incapable of feeling. I won't get involved with someone like that again.

My learning process

People want to change you. It doesn't work. You can go along with it, but it still doesn't work because you're just making a compromise. A bad compromise. And that means: failure. For instance, one person wants to buy a green rug, the other a blue rug. Finally they agree on a red rug, but nobody's really happy. I was constantly hearing things like: "Let's go to couple's therapy." Or: "Why don't you try behavioral therapy?" Today if I had to sum up where the disconnect was, I would say that I needed love instead of advice. And I didn't get it. Very simple. Very harsh.

I was always looking for love. Always for love.

I'd put a large part of my inheritance into the house, into renovations and additions, but that was just my attempt to compensate for other things.

It would've been easier if my wife had shown me some understanding. In retrospect I should've banged my fist on the table; I should've said: "Hey, your husband needs you too." But I couldn't do it at the time. Instead we just kept going as we had been.

Love doesn't work according to a plan. And I was terribly afraid of losing everything. I didn't stand up for myself, especially against my own negative thinking. I fell victim to my own cowardice.

At home I was called selfish, which was the ultimate insult then. I really disagree with that now. Selfishness can be the right thing sometimes. Doing something that's good for you can't be so wrong. Look at nurses, for example. Day in and day out they care for someone else. Frustration and anger build up. You could then kill the patient, like the way my father and our family doctor killed my grandmother. Both of them are dead now, so they can't be prosecuted anymore. Or you could simply say "Time out, today I'm doing something for myself. I'm going to the movies. Tomorrow I'll be much better and I'll be able to take better care of others." The last ten years of my marriage was like that, no one took a break for themselves. And I didn't have the courage to do anything for myself. Parts of my marriage worked. But there was no physical intimacy. I felt driven to have affairs. And in some ways, those were also good for me. I felt appreciated. I felt good.

My wife had started a relationship with another man three years before our separation, but I didn't learn about it until long after the divorce. She's still living with him today. He built her a house. I think she'd



always had some sort of plan like that.

I compensated for all the deficiencies with work.

Self-reflection

My freelance time was very successful. I wrote 20 books and scripts for television. I often dealt with the wrong people, though, and fell for empty promises. I would come up with ideas and storylines and edit stories, but then I wouldn't hear anything more and I'd never be paid. Later I'd be watching a crime show and think, "I know this story." And so on. A well-known moderator and his TV producer really ripped me off once. As the editorial manager I'd come up with the first 150 programs for a talkshow, but instead of the promised 200,000 euros, there was only 20,000 and a kick in the ass. That was combined with the promise that a broadcasting station would film two of my scripts. I'm still waiting for that.

I always seem to leave people with the wrong impression. They seem to think, "We can pull something over on that one." And I have problems with authority figures. For instance, I once broke into an apartment for a television moderator, my boss, to protect him from a legal disaster. And as thanks he didn't even mention me by name in his farewell speech. That hurt.

I think what I've been missing is the feeling of being appreciated in return. I should build an altar of appreciation. For myself. What started with my father never stopped. It bothers me a lot. I suffered from it a great deal. I have to be honest. Maybe I have a problem with personal vanity too? At home it was drummed into me, forbidden even, to be vain. My father always said: "Do your job well and the rest will take care of itself." It was only right before his suicide did he say: "Max, I was wrong."

Maybe my first career choice, becoming a journalist, was the right one. I've come back to it. It's actually not that easy when your own father co-founded a leading political magazine and famous writers are going in and out of your house all the time. Compared with that, RTL was like preschool. But I felt comfortable there.

I've always had a very strong desire to make things right for other people. For everybody else, but not for myself. So I created this permanent, artificial dissatisfaction in me to keep the motor running. When I look at my computer and see how many months of work I did for free just to do someone a favor or because I made someone a promise, acted in good faith, or was simply cheated – the total probably adds up to more than three years.

When I think about my biological parents, I have to ask myself the question: "How would I have turned out if I'd grown up with my biological mother in Catholic Bavaria?" I do know it was wrong for them to have never have spoken about it with me.

And yet somehow my parents in Hamburg will always be the ones I consider my parents.

What I've learned

I've realized that my parents didn't think being a kid was okay. That's a criticism I have looking back. I was raised with subtle authority; my father and I, we had an ambivalent relationship all the way up to his death. He was strict in some ways, but in other ways very lenient. Three times he helped me with my gambling



debts. The fourth time he gave me a check for 50,000 marks. That one I never cashed, though.

I've learned that you can change the direction of your life in an instant. But it takes a long time to internalize the change.

I've come to understand that when you're looking for personal happiness, you apparently have an invisible mark on your forehead. And thus you can never find it. Instead, you meet people who will only take advantage of you. Because they have an antenna to detect people like you.

I've decided to never put myself in such danger again.

My professional breaks have improved my writing style. My knowledge and writing have matured.

Everything is better than when I was pretending. Everything.

Quitting the club, which was entirely my decision, gave me a lot of self-confidence. And then there's happiness and luck. Suddenly you come across people who appreciate you. That in turn gives you the energy to face the next challenge.

The only real setbacks were financial ones. Some weeks all I had was 80 euros. But that's just the way it was. I knew that I was on the right track.

In my darkest hours, only the hunt for money got me out of bed in the morning. But bad things come with good things too. My addiction, my gambling, forced me to get out of bed every morning.

At some point my instinct for self-preservation kicked in. But I'm tough – it seems there were no lasting effects on me.

The worst was my disastrous love for the woman with borderline personality disorder. In that relationship, I looked into the abyss, went right up to the edge, and really got to know myself. The positive that came out of it is that today I know nothing can devastate me that way anymore. Those wounds have scarred over and healed and eventually I was able to analyze things clearly.

My life today

On my 50th birthday, I finally understood myself properly for the first time. I realized that I can deal with anything. Anything. I felt confident. I felt like the big winner of my own life, and I wanted to do something just for me. Just for me. I saved some money and flew to South Africa all by myself. It was an amazing trip. Wonderful.

Frankly, being in a state of crisis was all I knew. That's also why I gambled. If things were going particularly well for me, then I felt like something was missing. The sun was shining, the people were friendly, the food was good, the kids were healthy, the sex was great, but I'd think, "I can't go through life without problems." So I would add a problem. Again and again. That's over now.

Of course the gambling addiction fed my bad conscience. I don't need that anymore, though.



Today I am self-determined. I do exactly what I like doing. I write reports, books, and commentary. And I receive recognition for it. That's good for me. And it has good effects on my relationship with my kids and my ex-wife.

I set limits and I don't go past them anymore. They protect me.

I've also learned to say no. At the beginning that was hard for me. But it's a learning process.

I allow myself to take breaks. Sometimes I just lie down on the sofa for three hours or I read or I go to the video store and pick up a movie to relieve some stress. Or I do something with my new girlfriend. She gives me so much freedom that it never occurs to me to take advantage of her.

My goals have changed. Now my question is, as Socrates's once was: "Do I want to die happy?" I've learned that I can't have everything. And no, the grass is not greener on the other side.

If you want to change something, then do it. I made a clean break from my shallowness and from some people who weren't good for me.

My advice

I used to let other people have too much influence over me, so my message is:

Think of yourself.

Don't be afraid of what will happen.

You can withstand more than you think.

People are afraid of consequences. Kafka's statement, "You only need to change your direction," is very true. You are the only one who knows the right direction for your life and only you can change it. It can't get any worse. But you are the only one who can do it.

Of course everything depends on how far you have to fall. For some, a spill from a curb is enough. Others need to plunge off a mountain top to wake up. Everyone has to go through it by themselves. People that are at the beginning of their crisis usually know that something isn't right, that something feels wrong. My advice for you is to just go through the crisis. Don't worry about consequences. Everything will still turn out okay if you believe in yourself.

SUMMARY

Take Maximilian's advice to heart: "Think of yourself. Don't be afraid of what will happen. You can withstand more than you think."

Don't make life so difficult. Keep at it like Marie Curie, who said "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."



And listen to Gandhi, who understood that “the moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall.”

Dale Carnegie and many other motivational teachers have preached for hundreds of years: “Do the thing you fear to do and keep on doing it. That is the quickest and surest way ever yet discovered to conquer fear.”