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INTRODUCTION

Ever wondered what people regret the most when they are nearing the end of their lives? Not having lived their lives the way they wanted, but according to the expectations of others. Australian palliative nurse Bronnie Ware counsels people on their deathbeds and wrote about these regrets in her book *"The Top Five Regrets of the Dying."* All too often people don't think about what they really wanted to do with their lives until they realize the end is near. Only when it's too late do most people start to think, "Shit, if only I had worked a little less hard, if only I had the courage to express my feelings, if only I had stayed in touch with friends, if only I had allowed myself more happiness." If only, if only, if only. At the end of our lives, all kinds of unfulfilled wishes suddenly become obvious. In her book, Bronnie Ware shows that when the end is near, almost everyone had the same realization: if only I had been true to myself and lived my life in a way that made me happy.

It is not only on our deathbed that feelings of regret about the choices we made, or *didn't* make, surface. Many of us also experience this frustration during the rush hour of our lives, especially when we

are in the phase where we must achieve different goals and fill many different roles, from child, colleague and partner to parent and friend, with all the expectations and opinions that go with them. Especially during these times it can be hard not to lose track of who we really are. And it can be difficult to stay true to yourself because you keep getting distracted by how you want to be or think you should be and by all the labels that other people put on you. If I had to list reasons why people choose to see a psychologist, number one would be: I don't feel like myself anymore. I can't really be who I am and I'm not doing what makes me happy. People experience all kinds of symptoms, from stress and anxiety to panic and depression. Often what is behind their request for help is this feeling of not knowing who they are or not daring to live the way they want. Whether you go to a psychologist or a coach, do some soul searching, or spend an evening philosophizing with a friend at the kitchen table, for most of us that stress, that feeling of lacking control and of being out of balance, is the reason that at some point we all ask ourselves the question: "but what do I really want?" And that question is often what's needed to kickstart change. That change may involve who we love, our careers, where we live or the people we spend time with. It is the moment you realize that for you to be happy you have to make yourself a priority. That you have to truly choose yourself.

"I choose myself." That statement triggers a strong reaction in many people. It leads to comments like "oh, I'd also like that, I don't even know what makes me happy anymore," but also remarks like "wow, how selfish, you're not the only person in the world. Don't you care about other people?" The association with selfishness is especially persistent. But choosing yourself is not about *not* choosing others. Of course, you can be there for your family, for your friends and for people you don't know, but who desperately need your help. What "I choose myself" means to me is this: I am my own best friend. I am worthy of being loved and the first person who is going to give me unconditional love is myself. I take full responsibility for my life. I am in control of my thoughts, feelings, and actions. I value myself and I dare to say no and to set boundaries. I listen to my own inner voice; I am aware of what I need, and I believe that I am the one who can give it to me. For me, choosing myself means that if I take good care of myself, I can also take good care of others.

Really knowing, being and choosing yourself has a tremendous, positive transformative effect on yourself, others and your life. But it is also a challenge, because knowing and being yourself can be pretty damn difficult. Arranging your life in a way that suits you best, in balance with the things that must happen and with an eye for the people who are

important to you, is something we can struggle with for a lifetime. It's a bit like putting together an IKEA closet. When you start it all looks quite simple. You might think "I'll have it done in the blink of an eye." It's easy to say "you just have to stay true to yourself" – but when you find yourself juggling all the screws and bolts of the KNERPSTA, that feeling of healthy enthusiasm quickly turns into sweating, frustration, blind panic and a minor mental breakdown. And if you think the closet was complicated, it's easy-peasy compared to you. You were delivered without step-by-step instructions and chances are you're missing some screws and bolts too. That's exactly why I think it's time to teach you how to write and read your own manual. And to give you some tips about the parts you might still be missing and need to add, so that you can also build a sturdy structure for yourself.

At some point, we all think about the direction we want our lives to take. Our desires change over the years, and that requires some regular adjustments in how you see yourself and how you want to shape your life. This book lets you take an honest look at yourself and your life. Maybe it confirms that you already have a very good idea of who you are and that you are doing a pretty good job of staying true to yourself. Maybe it's a wake-up call that you still have a lot of work to do. In any case, this book will make you aware that you may, no, *must* put yourself

first and will give you a plan for how to do it. This book will give you insights, tools, and assignments – feel free to grab a pen and paper – to help you know yourself better. And once you know yourself, you will make choices that are in line with your happiness, and you can start living accordingly *today*. So that on your deathbed, when you are asked what you regret, you can say, “Regret? I don’t have regrets. I dared to live life the way I wanted. I have always been true to myself, and I have been there for, and enjoyed myself with, the people I care about. I chose myself and that is the best choice I ever made. I’m happy.”

– Kelly

KNOWING YOURSELF

Do you know who you are
if you don't let others tell
you who to be?

YOUR PAST

Don't worry, this is not the part where I say "lie down on my couch so we can pick apart your past." The fact is you will never be free of the past if you keep focusing on it. Constantly looking backwards and dwelling on all the misery that has happened to you will get you nowhere. The past is a part of your life that you can no longer change and that you simply cannot influence. My goal is not to endlessly analyze and risk getting bogged down in old stories, but purely to see which pieces of the puzzle from your past you need to understand yourself better. If you understand what influence your past has had, and still has, on how you think, feel and behave today, then you can let go of those parts that no longer help you and that keep you from being who you are and want to be. So that you can live your life the way that you want.

Maybe at this moment you don't know who you are, what you like and what direction you want your life to take. Maybe you know what you do *not* want. Or maybe you've reached a point in your life where you've got it pretty much figured out but you want to put all your ducks in a row. Maybe you keep falling into the trap of pleasing others. Daring to

put yourself first would bring you so much peace, but guilt prevents you from doing things differently. Maybe you feel you have to make choices, but you just don't know which one is right, because you are so influenced by the voices of others. Maybe you don't know if you should listen to your head or your heart – and all these doubts stop you before you can make a decision. Whether it's small wishes or big dreams and changes, the only way out is in. Inward, to be precise. You won't find the answers by looking around you, but by looking at yourself in the mirror. So the past is a very important factor. It's not about blaming the people who played a big part in it or looking at what went wrong and where you might have made mistakes yourself, but about knowing how to break certain old patterns and make the choices that are best for you right now.

In the context of self-development, you can talk endlessly about the past. About different attachment styles, complexes, family dynamics, traumas, triggers, defense mechanisms, coping styles, parenting styles and so much more. What I want to achieve with this book is to help you get to know yourself and learn how to make better choices for yourself. So, I will only delve into those aspects of your past that I believe will help you achieve this in the easiest way possible. What I don't want to do is overwhelm you with information that makes you think, "never mind,

this is too boring and complicated, whatever.” If you want to dive deeper into your past, because it interests you or because it suits your growth process, then I certainly encourage that. There are lots of great books, trainings, mentors and coaching methods that can help you with this. But personally, I believe that we don’t always have to make it very difficult for major change to happen. The trick is to keep it simple and practical, so that it’s easy to understand and apply in daily life. Our lives are busy enough already! And of course so that “working on yourself” is not a slog, but actually a lot of fun! That’s why I want to talk about trauma and conditions of worth. Simply put: what have you experienced in your life that has shaped you and when do you feel worthy of love and recognition? These past experiences form two important pillars that often make it difficult for us to choose ourselves.

In our youth we are programmed to think in certain ways. No one comes out unscathed. All of us carry stuff in our backpacks. Those things can be valuable, beautiful and helpful, but also sad, painful, traumatizing and everything in between. You watch and listen to your parents. You interact with your surroundings and mimic what you learn. You receive encouragement and disapproval. You experience things that impact you. All of this shapes you. If you don’t watch out and keep lugging things around