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ISBN: 979-10-989613-0-4

Published by
The Immersive Theatre of Learning

To Those Who Seek a Fulfilled Life

Forever — is composed of Nows

Emily Dickinson[i]

Other animals live in the present.
Humans cannot.
So they invented hope.

Young Woman in the film
I'm Thinking of Ending Things[ii]
by Charlie Kaufman (2020)

Oh, come on, baby
Oh, come on, darlin'
Let me steal this moment from you now
Oh, come on, angel
Come on, come on, darlin'
Let's exchange the experience

Lyrics from
Running Up That Hill (A Deal With God)[iii]
by Kate Bush (Hounds of Love, 1985)

WARNING

Please read this before opening the case.

The fictional characters in this book are inventions. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental—unless you happen to recognise yourself, in which case the investigation may already have begun.

Some of the evidence presented here is grounded in scientific research; the rest consists of observations, interpretations and advice with no firmer foundation than *my own meandering experience*[iv].

Treat these pages as clues rather than conclusions, and the invitations within them as experiments you are free to make without any guaranteed outcome.

Should you choose to read this book, you do so at your own risk. The author accepts no responsibility for unsettled assumptions, misplaced certainties, unexpected changes of perspective or a sudden desire to take a different path or to change your life.

Please keep your curiosity with you at all times. In the not-so-unlikely event of disorientation, resist the urge to return immediately to familiar ground.

Worldviews may shift during the journey, and some questions may remain open long after you have closed the book.

Should you encounter an unexpected version of yourself, do not be alarmed. Introduce yourself to the stranger. You may have a few things in common.

One final warning:
nobody has ever returned from this investigation … quite the same.

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Awareness is not a state you force.
There is little effort involved, though persistence is key.
It's something you actively allow to happen.
It is a presence with, and acceptance of, what is happening around you.

Rick Rubin – The Creativity Act[v]

Private Eye[vi]

Two steps, three steps, four steps behind
Nameless, shameless, the fugitive kind
Walk slow, don't show, invisible man
Mind you, behind you, blend in when you can

You're dreaming your way through the crowd
You're walking your head in the cloud
Your dream takes you right back to her
Her image comes back in a blur

Bernd Gibson – Private Eye (song lyric)

STARTING THE INVESTIGATION

You are holding *The Case of the Missing Present* in your hand. The story of a detective.

But actually, it's the story of all of us.

This book is not simply a crime novel. It's not a 'How To Be More Mindful' Guide either. It is not autobiographical. And it is not a sequel to my book *The Immersive Theatre of Learning*.

And yet, it may contain elements of all four.
Above all, it is a **field book**.

A field book for an investigation into your own life.
How you use it is up to you.

You can read it like a thriller, from beginning to end.
You can follow only the detective story.
Or focus on the reflections and exercises.

But the richest experience lies in the combination.

This book was written for the two layers–
fiction and non-fiction– to interact.

As the two begin to blur, a third layer will emerge: **your own life**. The places you go, the things you notice, the memories that surface and the people you encounter will become part of the investigation. At times, you may no longer be quite sure whether you are reading the story – or stepping into it.

By reading the book and engaging in the activities – alone or with others – *The Case of the Missing Present* can become a transformational journey.

While immersion is used a little too excessively these days, it is precisely what this book aims to be: immersive. Through self-guided experiences involving all your senses. Through story. Through reflection. Through music.

The keywords are: awareness, presence and time. Connection with yourself, your senses, with others and the world around you.

YOU ARE:

Someone with a lot on your mind.

Someone with things to do, places to go, people to meet.

Someone surrounded by sounds you may have stopped hearing, details you no longer notice, people you pass without really seeing them, routines you take for granted.

Someone remembering what happened yesterday and already thinking about what needs to happen tomorrow.

Someone whose attention is constantly being invited elsewhere. To another place. Another person. Another time[vii].

Maybe the next distraction is within reach.

That's fine. Don't try to leave any of it behind.

Bring it with you.

It is all part of the investigation.

You will learn to read the clues that can guide you back into your own life. You may be surprised by how much of it has gone missing.

You will be stepping into the role of a detective.

Who you are beyond that–
a sceptic or a believer, a local, a tourist or a traveller, a teacher or a student, a leader or a follower – doesn't need to change.

Bring it all with you.

Every perspective matters.
Every way of seeing, sensing, and making sense of the world.
Because this case cannot be solved from a single point of view.

The investigation will take some time. Like any investigator you may follow the wrong trails at first. Eventually, you will find the evidence, piece by piece.

You will need observation, patience, curiosity, and some of the other skills we too easily sacrifice to distraction.

We need a method, supported by science.

We need time.

And we need commitment.

Will you commit?

SLEEPLESS MIND

I woke up in the middle of the night.
Not from any noise. No phone rang. Just the kind of silence that presses against your skin and asks questions you don't have answers for.
The silence felt unfinished, like it had been interrupted in the middle of a thought. Suspended. Lingering.
There was no reason to be awake. But I couldn't go back to sleep.
The city outside was holding its breath. For minutes. Then I heard it snoring with a gentle, electric hum — the kind that creeps through windows and walls, and reminds you that even when everyone is asleep, nothing ever really rests.
I was thinking to myself: That's usually how bad cases begin — no warning, no clues, and no chance to say no.
But I was idle, without a client for weeks now.
Money was starting to run out. And boredom would sneak in with the subtlety of a burglar, slipping into the room, knowing how to move quietly across creaky wooden floors[viii]. It was a creepy feeling, not knowing when the next contract would come in. Life meant juggling with uncertainties. But I was satisfied with my life as it was and wouldn't want to trade it for 9-5 certainty in a cage.

I often suffered from insomnia when I was on a case. But there was no case. Or was there?

I checked my phone. 2:30 am. No voicemails. No texts. But somehow, without a knock on the door or a name on a contract, I knew I had a case.

I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for yet, but I knew this much: something was missing, and I felt the inner calling to find it.

The hum of the city sounded like a lullaby of things left undone. Relics of the past: regret, doubt, some guilt. They came out when the lights went low, when tomorrow was too far away to defend me.

That's when my brain would turn into an old film projector, rattling in the dark, playing the same black-and-white scenes all over again. Some of the footage already worn thin from too many late-night screenings. Some images were blurred. But the ending would always be the same. Just the same scenes looping, reminding me that some things don't fade with time; they sharpen. And I had a sharp memory, quite useful for a detective. But my brain didn't seem to have a place where I could archive some of these ever-returning flashbacks.

I tried to focus on what I had to do in the morning. There were some finished cases I had to file. I had never liked paperwork, but someone had to do it.

Maybe I should just get up, make some coffee, and get to work. This place was my bedroom, my kitchen, my living room, and my office, all in one. All in one room.

It was not only a question of affordable housing. I liked things to be simple around me. Life was complicated enough.

Making coffee was something I could focus on. No distractions. It had become a ritual for me.

I filled the kettle with filtered tap water. The switch of the kettle clicked like the safety being flicked off a gun. I waited for the low hiss, then the boil, watching steam rise like London fog in the old movies.

The freshly ground coffee went in next. I love that smell. And the colour. Dark, bitter, honest.
I poured slowly, steady hand, letting the blackened water flood my cup, counting the seconds like they mattered. For a few minutes, nothing else existed. No past. No future. Just hot, steaming coffee waiting to touch my lips.
And then it suddenly dawned on me.
This was it. The case!
Making coffee was one of these rare occasions when I was living in the moment, when I was fully alive.
Everything else in a day felt to me like a dead man walking, my body only a vessel for a brain that kept ticking and ticking, switching back and forth between past and future, between memories and plans.

But where is the **NOW**? Did I miss it all these years? Does anybody know how to be present—really present—with mind, body and soul?

It now became crystal clear to me. This was my case. The Case of the Missing Present.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING PRESENT



It begins like any mystery: something important has vanished.

The present moment—subtle, quiet, easily overlooked.

When did it get lost? What are the clues? Who are the suspects?

Suspect #1: Screens. Big or small.

Social networks and that little ding sound that tells you someone liked your status update.

Suspect #2: The brain.

Wired for memory and anticipation.

A mind racing ahead to imagined futures, dwelling in past memories, or travelling virtually to remote places. Filling blanks before things happen. Living in the future– and living in the past.[ix]

Suspect #3: Our busy lives.

We are so busy getting things done that we forget to BE.

The usual suspects. Probably all guilty to some extent.

And there are others.

The victim?

You.

Your life.

Are you missing it?

In our obsession with what was or what might be, we miss what *is*.

The case is now open.

The mission?

To uncover hidden gems in everyday life. To feel awe without having to travel to the Seven Wonders of the World.

But before you reach the wonders of your world, there's a crucial step – disconnect to reconnect.

Switch off your electronic devices for a while. Try half an hour, then a little more every day.

Reconnect with yourself, your thoughts, emotions and states of mind.

With the real world whispering around you.

With the people who are close to you, but who may have become somewhat estranged.

Also seek connections with strangers and make discoveries. Create a meaningful moment of human relation.

Connecting with the Here and Now is a skill. An intentional act. A ritual.

It's all about experiencing powerful moments[x]. But also about finding joy, meaning and fulfilment in ordinary things we do.

Only then does the real life appear.

The clues are not out there. They're *in here*.

ABSENT MIND

2:50 a.m.
The coffee had done me good. I felt fully awake and ready to tackle the case. Not my kind of self to work on an unpaid case to be honest. I don't believe in **pro bono**, but I believe in **pro me**.
Anyway, there was not much else to do in the middle of the night, except sleep. And sleep was no longer an option.
I still didn't know where to start. Maybe I should just start somewhere. Anywhere. Why not start with **time** itself?

I had to think of a song: *Live in the Moment, Baby*, by the Waterboys. From some concept album called *Life, Death and Dennis Hopper*.[xi] Mike Scott sings 'Live in the moment, baby. Play every scene for real.' This should be my motto in life.

I used to listen to music a lot. I even have an old vinyl record player. That's how you really listen to music. Vinyl slows things down the way the night does. You take the record out of its sleeve like evidence, careful not to leave fingerprints. You place it on the turntable, lower the needle, and wait. There's a breath before the sound arrives—a soft crackle, like a suspect clearing their throat.

No skipping. No cherry-picking. No playlist. You commit to a side. Twenty minutes where nothing else matters. Like listening to a confession.

The music doesn't ask what you're doing next or what you might prefer instead. It just plays. And if you listen closely enough, it teaches you how to stay tuned.

When was the last time I had listened to an album? I picked one and put it on. *Moanin'*, by Art Blakey and his Jazz Messengers[xii]. The music felt like an old friend. It filled the room. This was the soundtrack of my night movie now. I was starting to feel like Dennis Hopper.

WHAT TIME IS MY MIND IN?

Time is not innocent. I don't take it for granted.

Time is not even neutral. Not some universal truth, even though you can measure it. It never is. The clock says it's 2:55, but what time is it in my head?

Time picks sides. Some folks are stuck in the past, sounding bitter and resigned, like some of my exes. They dwell on the past like it's an old friend. The truth is, they don't have many others.

Some polish their mistakes until they shine. That sounds more like me. We keep polishing those old worn-out shoes, forgetting they'll never pass for new again.

Most folks are stuck in some kind of no-time, waiting for something to happen. Waiting for graduation day, for a better job, a promotion, a new flame, a new car, the next holiday escape, the weekend, wedding day, the birth of a child, graduation day of that same child, retirement, death. That's how the present disappears —

not kidnapped or stolen, just overlooked. As if it didn't matter. Most people live on the outside, or on the side lines of their own lives.
I had to think of yet another song:
Birth, School, Work, Death by The Godfathers[xiii].
Was that what life was all about? It now seemed to me that all these musicians had been on the same quest all along. I was no longer alone.
And while this thought went through my head I was wondering: was I living a life, or was it lived for me?
My mind is a fugitive on the run. What from? I don't know. And its closest ally is that little device in my pocket.

Still no messages, by the way.
I was asking myself: how long could I be without my cell phone? I certainly couldn't do my job without one.
And yet, when I started out as a young detective, I was like these guys in the old movies, using payphones in cafés and phone booths and leaving messages like: 'You can reach me at this number for the next fifteen minutes.' Today the message is: 'You can reach me at this number anytime, night or day.'
But nobody's calling.
Why is it even called phone anymore? Most folks text. And scroll. All these people on buses and trains, all in the same pose holding their phones and watching it. Whatever happens around them.
Some of them you could take to the Nine Wonders of the World (was it nine or less?), and I guess they still wouldn't look up.
If Rodin lived today, he probably wouldn't cast the Thinker[xiv] into iron, but the Scroller.

Here I was, alone in my little world, in the middle of the night, alone with the Jazz Messengers, being cynical. Is that a trait all detectives share? I don't necessarily want to be like that.
Now I was wondering, what time my mind was in most of the time? I wrote that question down. I looked at it and wasn't even sure it was good English. Would anyone understand it?

WHAT TIME IS MY MIND IN — MOST OF THE TIME?

JOIN THE FORENSIC TEAM



Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.

Pay attention to your breathing, to your body and your thoughts.

How are you feeling right now?

Leave behind, for a moment, the heavy burden of the past and the urgency of things to be done.

Place your attention here. Not perfectly. Not completely. But willingly.

Acknowledge the following and speak it out loud, like an oath that will allow you to join the team of investigators.

A rite of passage into the case.