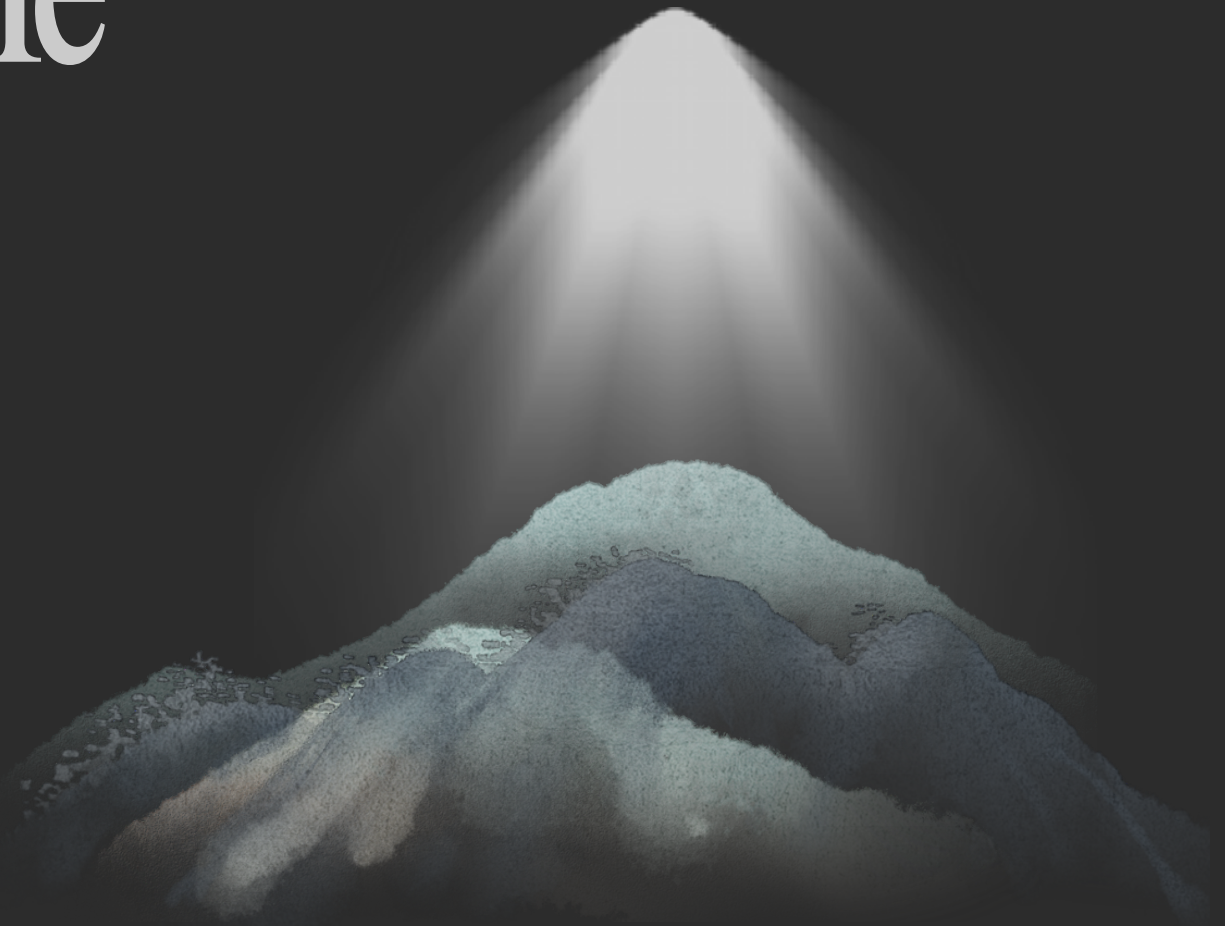


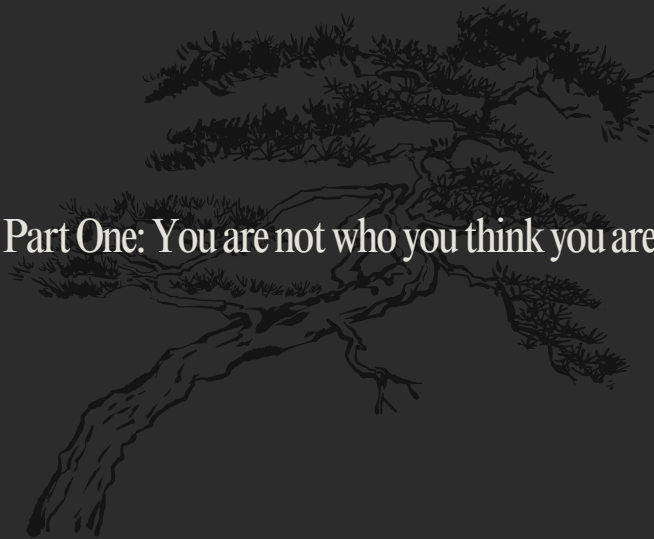
Nina Raj

the unquestioned life



...and the cost of not asking why

Part One: You are not who you think you are.



You are not who you think you are.

“People never rise above their opinion of themselves.”

—Peter Sage, TED Talk

From a young age, most people shape their sense of self around feedback from their environment: what others say about them, how they are treated, what behaviors are rewarded and what are dismissed. Certain messages get repeated until they feel like the truth.

Many are genuine and useful, rooted in safety and reality: *“Don’t touch the hot stove.”*; *“Don’t run into traffic.”* But many others are simply beliefs and fears that were handed down to us, and as children who lacked the tools to question them, we accepted them without resistance. This includes beliefs that continue to affect us in our adulthood. Some imply that certain careers carry more honor than others, that risk is something to avoid, that money and opportunity exist in fixed, finite supply, and many other beliefs like them.

If you grow up hearing, directly or indirectly, that you are not good enough whether it be in school, in sports, or in art, that message tends to settle into your identity. Over time you just accept these as facts about yourself and find yourself stating things like *“I’m just not outgoing.”* or *“I’ve always been bad at public speaking.”* without any second thought.

But what we don’t realize is that, often, these proclamations are just conclusions drawn from limited evidence, often formed in childhood and never examined since. They are limiting beliefs that assume that we are fixed beings, unable to learn and improve, no matter how much effort we put in. Most concerning, they prevent us from realizing our full potential and make certain doors to success appear closed and out of reach.

The work is to dismantle that. To question what you’ve internalized, build beliefs that actually fit who you want to be, and stop measuring yourself against a version of you that someone else decided on.

What We Traded Away

"We have lost touch with nature, and therefore with ourselves."

— Carl Jung

A deeper root of the problem is that society as we know it, no longer draws from what has given life meaning and direction for centuries. Age-old wisdom, the kind that carried entire civilizations through war, famine, and collapse, was exchanged for something cheaper, faster, and easier to digest. Much like what we've done with our food, clothes, and entertainment. We've optimized for convenience and lost something essential in the process.

In much of the western world today, there is an abundance of comfort and convenience but a deep shortage of connection and community. We are so connected through our phones and social media. We can access anyone with a few taps on our screens, yet the feeling of loneliness permeates deeply in society.

We are more technologically advanced than any generation before us. Healthcare has never been better. And yet we are watching an epidemic of young people who are depressed, purposeless, and adrift. According to the CDC, 40% of U.S. high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness lasting two or more weeks in the past year. We have access to more people's lives than ever, yet genuine connection has never felt harder to come by.

This feels paradoxical. Most people living in the developed world have the basics covered: a roof overhead, food on the table, clean water. By any historical standard, we are living in extraordinary comfort. And yet, so many of us feel lost and are constantly searching for something to give life meaning, as if the thing that makes it all worthwhile is still out there somewhere.

Ask yourself:

1. How are your relationships with those closest to you? What are some things that you have done that might have pushed some away?

2. Do you often reach out to people you want to keep in touch with? If not, why? In what ways have you traded real human connection for convenience?
3. In what ways do you try to cultivate the community around you? Do you feel like it is an inconvenience or a worthy endeavor?

Meaning Without Roots

"God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves?"

— Nietzsche

Historically, individuals have relied on their family, their community, and faith to give them a sense of belonging and meaning. Everyone had a role in the group and everyone relied on one another. As our lives got easier and more convenient, it has given us the blessing of being able to sustain ourselves and live independently. However, this has also made it easier to isolate ourselves from the community that once made us feel like we were part of something greater than ourselves.

In a similar way, as religion and faith faded from public life, so did the depth and structure they once provided. We still crave meaning but now we reach for substitutes. Many pour themselves into social causes they only half understand, less because they're driven by conviction and more because it earns approval from peers. Some chase follower counts, status symbols, the right car, the right house, and the right partner. All in the hopes that it will fill a hole in their hearts that craves belonging, purpose, and an explanation to life's complexities.

Nowadays, a partner has become, for many people, less of a life companion and more of an accessory, someone to perform a relationship with, rather than truly build one. We treat people as disposable the moment they don't meet an unrealistic standard we've made up in our heads, and we arrive at every new relationship carrying a checklist of requirements we'd never hold ourselves to.

Ask yourself:

1. Are you pursuing the things that genuinely fulfil you, or are you chasing things that simply look good to others to earn their approval?
2. Think about your closest relationships. Are you showing up as a true companion and partner, or are you treating people as accessories to the life you are trying to perform?
3. Where in your life are you expecting something from others that you are not willing to give yourself, and what would it look like to close that gap?

The silence we've accepted.

"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion."

— Proverbs 18:2

Public discourse has collapsed into performance and disagreement is treated as a personal attack. Just observe a live debate on any major news channel. Holding an opinion outside the approved range can get you shunned from entire conversations, even friend groups. So most people go quiet. Not because they've changed their minds, but because the social cost of speaking up feels too high.

Social media has only amplified the issue through personalized algorithms that confirm what we already believe. This creates an echo chamber where only our own views feel valid, leaving little room to understand or genuinely consider differing perspectives. In this way, it deepens the divide between people, making unfamiliar ideas seem more alien and unacceptable, often without those ideas ever being meaningfully explored.

Beyond the echo chamber, many people are quick to place blame outward rather than looking inward at where they themselves might be able to grow. There is nothing wrong with wanting to build a better world, but one of the first steps in doing so is ensuring your own life is in order before trying to rearrange everything else. As Jordan Peterson famously put it:

"Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world."

Ask yourself :

1. What topics tend to trigger me and elicit an emotional response?
2. In which aspects of life have I decided that I hold the ultimate truth and am closed off to any new information that might change my mind?

The Comparison Trap

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

— Ecclesiastes 1:2

One of the more insidious forces holding people back is how thoroughly society and technology have distorted our sense of what is normal. Social media did not just offer a window into other people's lives. It expanded our frame of comparison to the entire world. Where previous generations measured themselves against their immediate circle, friends, neighbors, family, people they actually knew, we now measure ourselves against an endless, curated feed of strangers at their best.

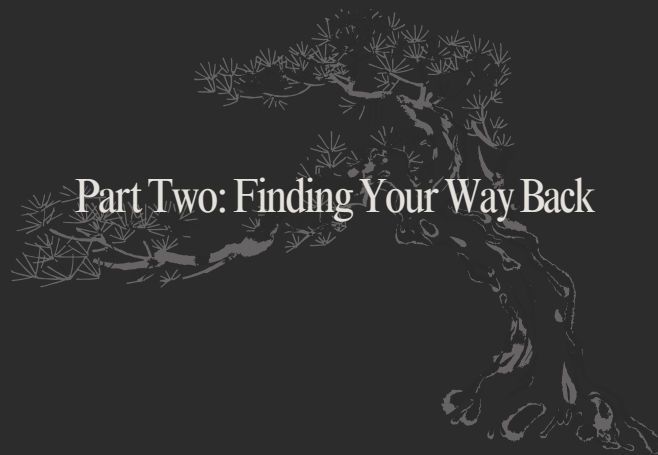
Without accounting for the full picture of someone's life, it is easy to fall into a comparison trap. The internet, especially, has made this comparison relentless. We scroll past other people's lives and forget we are only seeing the highlight reel. Nobody posts about their divorce or debt. Instead, they post about the honeymoon phase and what the debt bought them. The mess stays hidden, giving a deeply skewed picture of how everyone else is really doing.

As humans, it's normal to want to show off the good parts of our lives. It gives us external validation and makes our lives seem more exciting. We want to share memories of our vacations and achievements. Just think of the times that you have shared your own highlight reel: the perfect tropical vacation with palm trees and blue water. You most likely didn't show the mosquito bites on your legs and the bright pink sunburn stinging your back every time you try to put a shirt on.

That's why we have to be aware that what we see online is rarely the whole picture. The things we once would have called lucky breaks, now feel like falling behind. We take away our own joy and happiness of the moment and immediately think we are falling behind, making us the perpetrators of our own discontentment and misery.

Ask yourself:

1. Whose version of success are you actually chasing? Yours or one you absorbed from scrolling through other people's highlight reels?
2. Think of the last time you felt "behind" in life. Was that feeling based on your own values and desires, or was it a comparison to someone else's timeline?
3. What part of your own life have you been taking for granted, simply because it doesn't look as impressive as what you see online?



Part Two: Finding Your Way Back

Gratitude: The Real Version

"Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all others."

— Cicero

Being grateful isn't just about appreciating the good in life, like your health, a roof over your head, or the people you love. Those matter, and they're always worth acknowledging. But the side of gratitude we often overlook is the ability to be thankful for the difficult parts of life too. For the losses, the failures, the circumstances you never asked for.

Anyone who's tried knows it's not easy, but it's also where real healing begins. Because as long as you see yourself as a perpetual victim of what happened to you, you hand over your power. But the moment you start asking what a painful experience can teach you, you take it back. Practicing gratitude consistently makes you grounded because you are simply rooted in reality, seeing things and yourself as they truly are.

In a similar way, gratitude helps us see the joy in the mundane, in the things we often take for granted. We often go through life thinking that once we achieve a certain goal or have a certain number in our bank account, then we will be happy. We keep putting off our happiness, ignoring the simple joys of daily life like having our morning coffee, chatting with a friend, eating a good meal, or taking long walks.

What people often realise too late is that happiness is not a destination. It's a decision you make, again and again, in small moments throughout the day. As humans, complaining, worrying, and assuming the worst almost come naturally. That's why we need to watch our own minds closely, noticing the thoughts we repeat and asking honestly: Is this thought making my life better or worse?

Does it help me see the world in a way that puts me in control instead of making me feel like a victim? Does it make me grateful for what I have and appreciative of the people around me, or does it make me bitter and resentful?

And most importantly: is it even true? The more you cultivate this groundedness in everyday life, the easier it becomes to notice the good around you and your list of blessings grows longer.

Humility: Not What You Think It Is

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less."

—C.S. Lewis

Humility has a bad reputation in an age built around social media and personal branding. We conflate being humble with low self-esteem and shrinking yourself to make others comfortable. Conversely, we associate pride and brashness with power and self-belief.

The truth is that humility is simply honesty. Every person has real worth, and every person has blind spots, weaknesses, and areas where they're still improving. It's easy to talk about our strengths, but far less so our weaknesses. Humility is just the willingness to acknowledge both of those truths at the same time, without unnecessary self-deprecation.

Furthermore, we often don't realize how humility can actually serve our own self-development by keeping us open to learning, because when we think there's nothing left to learn, we prevent ourselves from growing. When we believe we're already the best version of ourselves, there's nothing left to improve. But when we cultivate humility, we acknowledge that we don't even know what we don't know.

Humility reminds us that we are not the center of the world, and thank God for that because it gives us the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. It helps us see our own imperfections and accept the fact that we are all works in progress. What matters most is having the self-awareness to recognize that in the first place.

Have No Enemies

"Holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."

— Buddha

This is easier said than done. When someone hurts you, the instinct is to never forget and to constantly rehearse the wrong they did. But the thing about holding a grudge is that you are not punishing them. Instead, you are prolonging your own pain. Every moment you spend ruminating on what someone did to you is a moment they still hold power over your life.

Forgiving someone is not the same as excusing what they did. You can forgive and still keep your distance. You can forgive and still hold a boundary. What forgiveness actually does is release you from the weight of carrying it.

Try to reframe it this way: the people who have hurt you have also taught you something. About yourself, about what you'll accept, about who you want to be, and who you don't. Most people who intentionally hurt others are usually, in one way or another, hurting themselves. They're at a difficult point mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Recognizing this doesn't excuse their behavior or invalidate the hurt they've caused you or others, nor does it mean allowing them back in your life. It just means you stop hating them and allowing them to have that power over you.

One of the best things you can do for yourself is extract the lessons that mistakes and tragedies teach you and move forward as a wiser person. We cannot change our past, but we can choose how we move forward. We can either allow it to destroy us and make us bitter, or we can grow from it and help others avoid the same mistakes, allowing us to turn painful experiences into a force to help not only ourselves but others around us.

What Other People Think Is Not Your Responsibility

"The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe."

— Proverbs 29:25

Many of us were shaped, early on, to not disappoint. If your childhood was built around earning approval from parents, teachers, anyone with authority, you probably carried that pattern into adulthood. It shows up as people-pleasing: constantly monitoring what others think of you and reshaping yourself to fit each room you walk into.

The problem is that people-pleasing doesn't end in other people liking you more. It ends in you liking yourself less. You can't build a real sense of who you are when you're always shape-shifting to appear "good" or "acceptable" to whoever is in the room. The only thing you actually control is what you think of yourself. Everything else is outside your hands, and in a way, that removes the burden of always wanting to be liked. While it is important to be cordial with others and build deep, meaningful relationships with those closest to us, it should never come at the cost of our own self-respect and boundaries.

This is often easier said than done. People-pleasing is not simply a bad habit you can drop overnight. It is a deeply ingrained survival response, one that was probably rewarded since childhood. Unlearning it requires you to sit with the discomfort of not knowing what others think of you and choosing to be okay with that. It requires you to ask yourself what you actually want, what you truly believe, and what kind of person you are when no one is watching. That is where your real identity lives.

Let Go of Fear

"Fear is a mile wide and an inch deep."

—Alex Hormozi

Fear is everywhere right now. It's in every news headline and it's the message behind most of what's being sold to us. That's not a coincidence, it's by design. People in power figured out long ago that a fearful population is a controllable one. Anyone who profits from your anxiety has every reason to keep you anxious.

A lot of what we fear isn't even based on observable facts. Often, it lives in our heads, in the worry of what others will think, in the anticipation of failure, in the dread of being judged. It lives in the abstract. What we don't realise is that the imaginary crowd who's criticism we fear so much doesn't even exist in the first place. We waste the best years of our lives performing for an audience that wasn't even watching. We have to reach a point where the fear of missing our true potential frightens us far more than anything a critic could ever say.

When we operate from a place of fear instead of faith, we stay in our comfort zone, thinking that it will keep us safe. We don't realize that doing so can actually have greater consequences because it prevents us from growing into the person we need to become to reach our goals. True alignment can only be found on the other side of fear because the version of you that is comfortable cannot take you somewhere you've never been.

Learn to be kind to yourself.

"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom."

— Aristotle

One of the hardest skills you will have to learn is to be kind to yourself. Many people tell you to love yourself, and I don't completely disagree. However, there is a difference between loving ourselves as we are and loving ourselves enough to stop making excuses and change for the better, even if it means letting go of the identity we have held onto all our lives. When you love someone who is self-sabotaging, you want to help them see the light and change their ways. So why are we sometimes unable to do the same for ourselves?

Choosing to be kind to ourselves often takes a back seat when we believe we are supposed to suffer for our goals. We *do* have to make sacrifices, but they have to come from a place of love, not self-deprecation. The person who sees joy in the mundane, in the daily grind, will far outperform someone who believes that suffering is built into the process and that allowing themselves to be happy somehow gives their achievements less meaning.

For better or for worse, we become what we focus on and what we think about all day. In a world where negativity reigns and complaining is just a conversation starter, choose instead to be grateful and to speak with love, grace, and kindness. Though difficulty and struggle are inevitable in this life, never let them fester in your mind so much that negativity becomes your default mode of being.

That power is within us, and it is one of the most important ones we have. The same mind that can sabotage your life is the same one that can take you to places you never thought you could reach. This can make all the difference between a fruitful life and a miserable one.

Let go of blame.

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

— Psalm 34:18

Many things that happen to us are not our fault. We often find ourselves subject to the will of others, for better or for worse. We didn't get to choose how we were raised, what country we were born in, or much less the financial situation we were born into. With an untrained mind, we are far better at remembering the bad things that happened to us than the good, making it difficult to let go of bitterness and blame. It is natural to want closure and an answer to all the pain and suffering that we endure. That desire is deeply human.

This goes back to one of the greatest mysteries of life: Why do we suffer? What is the meaning of all the struggle that we endure? Why is the world fair for some and seemingly forgets others?

Some explain it as karma or divine retribution for something done in a past life or by ancestors. Others say it is due to original sin. What makes this a great mystery is that as humans, we are limited in knowledge, and there is no way for us in this life to know with certainty why suffering exists.

What is more certain is that just as suffering exists, so does the opportunity to alleviate it for ourselves and others. We may not always get to choose our circumstances, but we do get to choose how we proceed. We can allow our pain and struggles to dull our flame, to make us a shell of a person, or we can let them sharpen us into someone who understands deeply the suffering of others.

Learn from the mistakes of others.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

— George Santayana

Nothing is new under the sun. This goes for everything, including feelings, thoughts, and relationships. Though we like to think our problems are unique, the feelings behind them rarely are. They are rooted in human nature and in behaviors driven by ego. This means that someone far brighter than any of us has likely faced the same problems we're facing now, and has left behind wisdom on what they learned and how they overcame them. Too often, we make the mistake of letting so much of this knowledge go untapped simply because we think it no longer applies to us.

The answers to age-old questions of how to live meaningfully, what truly matters, where to invest our time, what we won't care about on our deathbeds. These questions have been answered time and time again by great philosophers and thinkers since the beginning of recorded history. The setting may differ, the language may vary, but the answers to the same hard questions remain consistent.

The more we read, the more we learn to recognize patterns of cause and effect. Simply by studying and observing the world around us, we gain a valuable lens through which we can uncover life's most valuable lessons. Learning from the mistakes of others is one of the most powerful tools available to us, yet one of the most underused.

Closing: The unfinished work.



Closing: The Unfinished Work

"Absorb what is useful, discard what is useless, and add what is specifically your own."

— Bruce Lee

Most of us are moving through life on autopilot, shaped by ideas and beliefs we've never stopped to question, chasing goals we never consciously chose. We follow the same routines, practices, and beliefs that were chosen for us, never realizing there is another way and that we can choose to carve our own path by cultivating the habit to stop and look within.

The people who actually change their lives for the better are not the ones who had more talent or better circumstances. They're the ones who were willing to be honest with themselves, even when it was uncomfortable. Even if it meant taking apart many of the ideas and assumptions that they were accepting until now. Still, they were willing to act, even when they didn't feel ready. They recognize that they determine the trajectory of their thoughts and, by extension, their life.

The good news is that, in the same way, you have the capacity to observe your own thinking and choose better actions and habits. You have a mind that, once directed with intention, can help you become the person required to reach your goals and build healthy, longlasting relationships. This is a practice that will serve you for the rest of your life, through new chapters, career changes, tragedies, and so much more. Like any practice, what it gives you is proportional to what you bring to it.

The real work happens when you finish reading and go back to your life. To the relationships that test you, the fears that consume you, the old patterns that pull you back. That's where this either becomes real or stays theoretical.

— Nina Raj

