

Praise for
THE COMMUNAL HEART

“The Communal Heart by Claudia Dommaschk is a groundbreaking work that plants seeds of liberation in the collective imagination. It is a rare and necessary book—one that speaks directly to the ache of our times. With exquisite clarity and mythic sensitivity, Claudia maps how we move from isolation to belonging, from collapse to coherence, from the fractured self to a shared pulse that feels both ancient and radically new. This is not merely a book about community; it is a blueprint for rehumanization. Every page beats with insight, courage, and a fierce tenderness for what we are capable of becoming together. Few writers can hold complexity with such grace—fewer still can translate it into frameworks that feel both intellectually rigorous and soulfully alive. *The Communal Heart* is required reading for anyone who cares about the future of our shared humanity and seeks a new way forward. It’s one of the clearest, strongest, and most transformative works in the space of non-religious spirituality.”

—JIM PALMER, Author of *Notes from (Over) the Edge*,
and Founder of Center for Non-Religious Spirituality

“Most books about belonging are written from within the fragmentation they claim to diagnose. Dommaschk has done the harder thing: she’s written from integration, which means the structure of the book performs what the content describes. This is what genuine metamodern work looks like in practice.”

—EMIL EJNER FRIIS, co-author of *The Listening Society*

“The Communal Heart is a timely call back to belonging within ourselves and with one another. Claudia Dommaschk weaves Gestalt insight, somatic wisdom, and grounded practice into a clear invitation toward the communal coherence our world is asking of us.”

—STEVEN HARPER, Psychologist, Gestalt Practitioner,
and Workshop Leader of the Esalen Institute

“Claudia’s work is a potent reminder of just how far we can go if we slow down enough to collectively rediscover our communal heart. She’s an active trailblazer in the field of community weaving, and her first book has eloquently laid out a pathway towards that most rare and sacred of things...sustained relational resonance! We need so much more of what Claudia’s doing in the world, and I sleep better at night knowing she’s out there leading the way. Her words shine forth with a mother’s love, a therapist’s keen insight, and a practitioner’s hard-won wisdom. This book is for everyone who’s genuinely ready to belong.”

—JOE LIGHTFOOT, Author of *A Collective*
Blooming: The Rise of Mutual Aid Community

“In this beautiful book, Claudia Dommaschk’s writing unfolds like a watercolor painting, layer by layer, revealing a path that comes gradually into view. And somewhere along the way, something in us softens and recognizes itself. The heart responds with a quiet ‘yes’—a felt sense that, beneath the surface, belonging has always been true.”

—LUCIE CHALIFOUR, Spiritual Director/Childbirth
Educator and Founder of Unfolding New Life

“Dommaschk has a rare gift: rigorous models that you can actually feel your way into. Again and again, she finds the counterintuitive angle on material that could easily have been predictable. Essential reading for anyone who leads people.”

—ROBERT KELLEY AYALA, Managing
Director of VIBE LABS

“In this book, Claudia Dommaschk presents us with a systemic analysis of the forces pulling us apart, which is a great step in our healing journey. She also offers us an evolutionary path to transform our individual selves and to use relational intelligence to create loving relationships and wisdom communities, thus contributing to a better world.”

—MANUEL MANGA, Founder and Director
of the Center for Evolutionary Leadership

“This is a beautiful book as it will hold you, entrance you, and activate what’s within us all. However, it’s far more practical and powerful than this—merely coming home to ourselves. Our boundaries don’t stop there; what matters is between us and among us—taking us into the fractals of coherence—our awareness, sensing, and feeling, changes the world.”

—SIMON DIVECHA, Ph.D., Founder of Soulsentient

“*The Communal Heart* carries a timely message on the connections we’ve lost, the toll this loss has taken, and why a return to community will be a critical part of our individual and collective journeys back toward wholeness. Perhaps even more importantly, Claudia shows us how to find and nurture the connections we’ve all been looking for.”

—JEFF WILLIAMS, Co-founder of Network of Networks

“In *The Communal Heart*, Claudia Dommaschk brings us back to something ancient and essential: the relational intelligence of the heart. Both a clear-eyed diagnosis of our cultural fracture and a compelling path toward repair, this is a book for anyone seeking to meet the crises of our time without losing their humanity.”

—GOD’SWILL OSA, Ph.D. in Government,
Writer of Politics and Embodiment

“As the metacrisis deepens, the need for healthy masculine energy supporting healthy feminine energy grows. It is time for the Queen and her Knights. In *The Communal Heart*, Claudia Dommaschk shows us a way. Her book is special to me because she is a dear friend. It is now my intention to direct some of my masculine energy towards supporting the healthy feminine energy evident in Claudia’s book.”

—JOHN STOKDIJK, a founding member of Wisdom
Exchange, an international community committed
to making sense of a complex world.

The
COMMUNAL
HEART

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A RETURN TO BELONGING
IN A WORLD PULLING US APART

CLAUDIA DOMMASCHK



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First Edition

To those who come after us

CONTENTS

Preface	xiii
Introduction: The Heart We Have Forgotten	1
PART I: THE CRISIS OF MODERN CONNECTION	11
Chapter 1: When Attention Splits	13
Chapter 2: Where We Come Pulled Apart	29
Chapter 3: How We Find Our Way Home	39
PART II: RETURNING TO OURSELVES	55
Chapter 4: In Rhythm with Nature	57
Chapter 5: The Practice of Being Here	67
Chapter 6: Rewriting the Stories We Inherit	83
An Invitation to Practice the Communal Heart in Daily Life	91
PART III: RETURNING TO ONE ANOTHER	93
Chapter 7: Those Who Help Us Become	95
Chapter 8: The Art of Generative Exchange	105
Chapter 9: Cracks That Bring Us Closer	113
An Invitation to Practice the Communal Heart in Dialogue	122

PART IV: RETURNING TO THE WORLD WE SHARE . . .	123
Chapter 10: A Reunion We Long For	125
Chapter 11: The Third Way Opens a New Path	139
Chapter 12: The Dynamic Reality of Belonging	149
An Invitation to Practice the Communal Heart as an Internal Compass	157
PART V: TOWARD A RELATIONAL FUTURE	159
Chapter 13: Circles of Renewal	161
Chapter 14: From One Light Come Many Rays of Hope . . .	169
Chapter 15: An Emergent Movement Gathering Life . . .	173
An Invitation to Practice the Communal Heart in Action	179
Epilogue: It Starts with Us	181
Wisdom Circle Guidelines	187
Glossary of Core Terms	191
Acknowledgments	197
Notes	199
About the Author	213

PREFACE

*Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world
at once, but of stretching out to mend the part
of the world that is within our reach.*

—Clarissa Pinkola Estés

I did not set out to write this book.

Writing came to me quietly, in the whispers of my soul, in the hush before sunrise, in the last flickers of daylight. In the liminal space between what has been and what longs to emerge is where this book found its breath.

Finding our voice is one of the most sacred acts of being alive. I have been searching for mine for a while, first in the echoing halls of a lonely childhood home and later in academic corridors where intellect was prized over intuition. Often, I spoke in the hope of being understood. When that bridge of understanding faltered, I learned to steady myself on uncertain ground by leaning toward abstraction, linearity, and what seemed expected. I tried to craft responses that were polished, abstract, and clear.

But this time, writing itself has changed me.

With a stronger sense of myself, I am trusting my inner voice, allowing it to move through me less filtered and more alive. It now arises from a place that feels both uniquely mine yet profoundly shared. It unfolds in spirals rather than straight lines. It holds me as much as I hold it. In this movement, it reveals an important truth: How we speak is part of what we say. The structure of a message is never separate from its flow.

You may wonder why a book on healing would begin with a personal disclosure about process, or why emergence is worth considering at all.

Healing is not only about addressing the content of the wound itself. It is also about contact, presence, and the quality of the attention we bring to the wound. True healing asks us to unravel the stories threaded into the wound and to listen for what longs to be born through it.

I imagine you agree. Something is unraveling among us. We feel the tension in our bodies, in our relationships, and in the anxiety that hums beneath the surface of everyday life. The ways we commonly live, driven by domination and marked by disconnection, no longer hold. We have outgrown them, or perhaps, they have outworn us. Either way, the center of our modern society seems to be collapsing. Yet amid this unraveling, something else, more vital, is beginning to break through.

This book emerges from this place where the personal and cultural meet, not in theory, but in the lived experience of watching well-thought-out strategies and carefully constructed systems fail. Meanwhile, the human spirit persists, courageously insisting on another way, on another process.

As a psychotherapist, I have sat beside people when they were most unguarded, as old narratives fall away and new ones begin to form. I have come to recognize that what we are experiencing, as modern human beings, shaped by Western ideals of progress and individuality, is not merely a psychological reckoning, but a spiritual, ecological, and civilizational shift.

We are standing together on a threshold.

When I reflect on this realization, the implications become clear. Our crisis is not just political, economic, or environmental. It is also relational. We have lost connection with our bodies, with one another, with what is sacred, and with the deeper intelligence that exists in all things. We have been trained to relate to this intelligence from fear and through the pressure to perform and be productive. We have been sold an illusion of control, and it is harming us.

But the truth is, we can remember another way. Remembering how to be with one another, how to listen, how to love without an agenda, is the foundation for returning to a relational field of connection that exists within us, between us, and among us. This field of relationship longs to be restored.

While this book is, in part, a diagnosis, it is primarily a call to acknowledge what is breaking and to begin the slow work of mending. It is not about fixing the world through smarter strategies. It is about reclaiming what makes us human and expanding our capacity to witness, feel, and relate across difference without collapsing into division.

I offer this book as a response to the commodification of our inner lives and the exhaustion so many of us carry from trying to

find our place in a culture that has forgotten the essential need for belonging. Within these pages, I map the pervasive forces that pull us apart and offer an embodied return, one that invites both personal healing and a renewed capacity to find coherence with one another.

Because healing, genuine healing, does not happen in isolation. It happens in communion.

If you have been feeling that something is not right but cannot quite name it, if you have longed for a different kind of leadership but are not sure what it looks like, or if you have sensed that a collective reorientation is underway but do not know how to participate in it, consider this the signal that you are remembering another way.

So, let us begin right where we are, in the space between what is breaking down and what is subtly breaking through. Let us cultivate relational practices that honor difference, welcome resonance, and make room for the full spectrum of becoming. What ultimately enables us to grow and flourish is not the path we choose, but whether it brings us closer to who we truly are.

Our shared future depends on this.

Davis, California

May 2026

Introduction

THE HEART WE HAVE FORGOTTEN

*The future belongs to those who give the
next generation reason for hope.*
—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

In a twist that sounds more like science fiction than social research, an April 2025 *Forbes* article by John Koetsier reported on a survey, commissioned by an AI companion company, in which 80 percent of Gen Z respondents said they would consider marrying an AI if it were legal.¹ I nearly waved it off as another strange footnote in our rapidly evolving technological landscape, but when I paused to reflect, the implications became sobering. People aren't falling in love with machines because they don't know better. They're reaching for what they can no longer reliably find elsewhere.

For younger generations, those learning to love and connect by watching adults around them who are themselves increasingly absorbed by screens, this blurring of emotional boundaries between

humans and machines is especially disorienting. As a tech-driven society, we seem to be choosing intimacy without the raw messiness of human relationships. In a world where real connections have grown increasingly strained, it is no surprise that AI offers a more comforting, predictable alternative.

But let's be clear: These "relationships" are simulations.

Why are we willing to trade real, embodied connection for a curated facsimile? If the contentment we draw from these simulated relationships isn't merely about a technological fascination, then perhaps this longing points to a far more serious concern. I believe it does.

Everywhere we look, systems are under stress. We're inundated with reports of climate collapse, economic inequality, a loneliness epidemic, and increasing polarization.² What we're witnessing isn't a series of isolated crises but the culmination of a long, slow unraveling of relational life.

At the heart of this unraveling—what many now refer to as the metacrisis or a crisis of crises—is a breakdown in how we relate to ourselves, one another, the Earth, and the mysterious pulse of life that animates it all.³ Shaped by a modern culture that privileges competition over compassion, dominance over dialogue, and certainty over curiosity, we seem to have forgotten how to be with one another in ways that nourish and sustain us. As our relationships fray, so too does the fabric of our shared existence.

To begin healing these cultural divides, this book explores the fragmentation in perception and meaning-making that distorts how we engage, both within ourselves and with the world around

us. Together, we will examine the gendered and social fissures that shape how we live, lead, and love, as well as the widening rift between humans and the natural world. Our aim is to understand and repair the disconnection that severs us from the very ground of our belonging.

As a psychotherapist, wife, mother, and lifelong student of personal transformation and community-building initiatives, including Wisdom Exchange, I've spent many hours listening to people, observing patterns, and holding the silent spaces in between that carry countless untold stories.⁴ During this time, I've come to realize that much of our suffering begins with ruptures in relationships. The feeling of being unseen and unsafe, or the belief that vulnerability is a weakness, often stems from our earliest childhood experiences and is reinforced throughout life. These formidable wounds affect how we move through the world and, in turn, how we relate to it. When disconnection becomes our default, it is present in all aspects of our lives. It appears in the private pain and invisible struggles we feel compelled to carry alone, unsure of how to ask for support or whether it would even be safe to do so. It also shows up in the ideologies we cling to, where fear replaces wonder and opposing views become threats rather than opportunities for understanding. And it becomes evident in our growing difficulty collaborating across differences, as trust erodes and we forget how to listen, negotiate, and coordinate together.

And yet, there is another way. I've also witnessed the unmistakable power of reconnection, moments when defenses soften, and tenderness becomes a bridge rather than a threat. Such moments

are not only personally healing but also collectively transformative. When one heart opens, it invites others to do the same. This positive effect ripples outward, touching the person who experiences it and the web of relationships they are a part of.

This book is a path of return.

Drawing on over thirty years of working with clients to cultivate connection, alongside my study of psychotherapy and my lived experience, I offer an integrated path that invites us to move courageously toward the fractures of modern life and begin mending the field that holds us together. I call this field of interconnected relationships—this dynamic realm of relationality—the Communal Heart.⁵

Because your time and attention are precious, I attempt to share this path into the Communal Heart with humility and care. Across five parts, this book introduces you to a way of re-entering the field of belonging, a term we'll become more familiar with later, that begins with presence, deepens through mutuality, and draws its strength from coherence. It is an invitation to remember what connects us, restore what has been forgotten, and reclaim the aliveness that emerges when we meet life and one another as we are.

Each chapter welcomes you into the ideas and then accompanies you in bringing them into practice. To help ground the material in lived experience, you'll encounter real-life stories with all identifying details, including names and quotes, carefully changed to protect the privacy of those involved. I also draw on my clinical work, personal experience, and an ongoing dialogue with the cultural threshold we are all living through to share

philosophical insights, embodied practices, and reflective questions. My hope is that these offerings provide a shift not only within us as individuals but also among us as a people, helping us remember how to cohere again.

FINDING OUR WAY INTO SHARED MEANING

Much of the confusion and conflict we face today arises not only from seeing different facts but from inhabiting different perceptual worlds as well. The way we attend to life shapes what we can perceive. When attention narrows without a felt sense of context or relationship, reality can appear fragmented, objectified, and flat. When attention widens, a more relational and contextual world comes into view, one that includes tone, meaning, history, and possibility. These are not merely differences of opinion, but differences in modes of attention, each revealing a different kind of reality. How we attend, both in what we notice and in the quality of presence we bring, quite literally gives rise to the kind of world that shows up for us.

Throughout this book, I make careful distinctions between awareness, attention, mode of attention, and perception because these differences carry weight. Awareness refers to the spacious field in which experience unfolds. Attention is the movement within that field, the way we focus by widening or narrowing the scope of our engagement. When our mode of attention shifts, our mode of perception shifts with it. We do not just think differently; we *see* differently. Learning to work with attention, rather than

being unconsciously driven by it, opens the possibility of more coherent perception, deeper relationships, and wiser responses.

Before we continue, let's explore the core theme that underlies this book. It centers on sensitive topics in biology and gender and on how social conditioning can confine our full expression as human beings. I imagine that what follows may stir emotion. Any perspective, including my own, presented here in this book, is partial and incomplete. My hope is that by bringing greater depth and care to the conversation, we might move toward a wider synthesis, not a definitive solution, but a meaningful step toward easing a long-standing tension between gender and culture in the modern world.

That said, I would like to clarify a few key terms, since arriving at a shared understanding of language is essential. Language can both illuminate and reduce. When we collapse people into labels, we risk objectifying them, turning living, breathing complexity into simplified categories. While labels can make conversation cognitively easier, they can also erase nuance and difference. When nuance is lost, so is mutuality. With this in mind, I offer the following definitions as working agreements, stepping stones toward a conversation that aims toward fuller understanding.

When I refer to “male” and “female,” I’m speaking about biological sex—more specifically, the reproductive systems and secondary sex characteristics that give rise to sperm and egg, and through their union, to new life. When I use the words “man” and “woman,” I am referring to those whose gender identity aligns with their biological sex, in other words, cisgender individuals. When I speak of “masculine” and “feminine,” I’m

not referring to fixed identities or traditional gender roles, but to general patterns of perception and participation found across cultures and stories over time, tendencies with biological roots that also live within each of us.⁶ From this energetic standpoint, I understand the archetypal feminine as a mode of generative receptivity and relational attunement, and the archetypal masculine as a mode of penetrating focus and instrumental agency.⁷

While many examples in this book are informed by my work as a licensed marriage and family therapist with cisgender, heterosexual couples in the United States—contexts in which these general dynamics often appear in especially clear relief—the principles explored here are not confined to these pairings. They speak to a universal aspect of our shared humanity. It is in this spirit that I invite you to approach these dynamics not as prescriptions of gender identity or sexual orientation, but as expressions of relational energy that move through all human connections and much of the non-human world. My intention is to honor the diversity of lived experience while offering these reflections as openings into a deeper understanding of connection, rather than as limitations or fixed categories.

To support the integration of these insights into your relationships, communities, and professional life, you'll find guidelines for starting your own Wisdom Circle, along with a glossary of terms, at the end of the book. These additions are given as direction-finders to help you orient yourself as we navigate this emerging relational terrain together. At times, the book may be prescriptive, but it is not intended to be a manual. It is a map written in the language of relationship. More importantly, it

is an invitation to open, listen, and trust what you already sense deep down: We were never meant to do this courageous and tender work alone.

As we walk this path into the Communal Heart, we begin to recover wholeness, not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived reality. In rediscovering the threads of connection that make life meaningful, we find our way home—home to ourselves, to one another, and to a world we belong to, one that, in its subtle way, longs to belong to us too.

THE SUPPORT AND INFLUENCES BEHIND THE WORK

Because the journey ahead is one of integration, it's important to share the thinkers and practitioners who have shaped my understanding and experience of relationality. More than mentors or guides, they are companions on this path, whether I met them in person or on the page.

Carl Jung offered an enduring foundation for my work, teaching me to recognize the psyche as a living, symbolic reality and to understand integration as an ongoing practice of holding opposites in relationship. Iain McGilchrist's insights into the divided brain deepened this understanding by revealing how our overidentification with narrow, abstract attention has pulled us away from wholeness, both personally and collectively. Dick Price and the lineage of Gestalt Practice taught me to trust emergence and to listen for what wants to come forward. Hanzi Freinacht's framework of metamodernism and Ken Wilber's

integrative approach helped name the developmental pivot we're living through as a culture. Finally, Russ Hudson's interpretation of the Enneagram illuminated the sacred longing within me to come home to myself, others, and life itself. As someone who identifies with Point Four on the Enneagram, I have come to appreciate the joy and heartache of awakening to the freedom of reality through recognizing its artistic nature and profound depth. It is through these convergences, and sitting with people in the raw, unfinished places of their becoming, that my life's work, contained within these pages, comes forth.

Throughout the book, you may notice a recurring rhythm: "not just this, but also that," or "not only this, but that as well." You'll also come across occasional sentence fragments. These aren't mistakes or simply stylistic flourishes; they're intentional. They reflect a way of thinking and relating that resists closure in favor of curiosity, a rhythm that pauses to breathe and allows meaning to emerge slowly in its own time. This is more than a literary choice. The way we shape language mirrors how we move in the world. When we write and live this way, we begin to embrace nuance, hold tension, and honor the fertile space between polarities. Everything arises from this place and ultimately returns to it.

The structure of this book reflects the relational paradigm it seeks to evoke, one that values mutuality and generativity alongside individuation and self-realization. It calls us to reawaken our relational intelligence and meet the world not only as individuals but also as midwives and stewards of coherence. Through how we speak, touch, decide, lead, and repair, we become participants in

a universal wholeness that supports a future worthy of the next generation and those to come.

Above all, this book asks us to remember what we've always known: Life is relational, and its center is the heart we share.

Welcome to a path into the Communal Heart.

Part I

THE CRISIS OF MODERN
CONNECTION

Chapter 1

WHEN ATTENTION SPLITS

*We cannot solve our problems with the same
thinking we used when we created them.*

—Albert Einstein

One of my favorite Saturday afternoon rituals used to be walking through the bright sunshine, then slipping into the cool shade beneath the tree-lined streets of the small college town where I live. I loved the scent of coffee drifting from the corner café, and the planters spilling over with color. Everyone would nod to say hello, some pausing for brief conversations, small gestures of recognition that gently stitched us together.

These days, however, the shared ease between people has shifted. Heads are down, shoulders are hunched, and eyes are glued to screens. People pass by one another without acknowledgment, their attention pulled inward. I can't help but feel a twinge of loneliness when I walk these streets now. It strikes me how common, how heartbreakingly familiar, this scene has become.

We've all had moments of standing in a crowded room and feeling alone. So, we turn to our phones for distraction, scrolling through hundreds of updates, yet still sense that nothing feels quite real or satisfying. Aching for more meaning, we look toward the future at a full calendar, wondering why, despite it all, we still feel empty.

These aren't passing moods. They're signals, faint stirrings from within and around us, that something essential is missing. Many of us are beginning to sense that this dissonance extends far beyond our personal lives, pointing to a fundamental imbalance woven into modern life. We may name it as burnout, polarization, or ecological collapse. But beneath these symptoms lies a story of disconnection. This chapter invites us to take a closer look at our growing sense of disconnection, trace these symptoms back to their source, and begin to recognize the larger pattern they reveal. What we uncover may not be easy to face, but it is the first step in healing the divide of modern life and moving toward reunion and greater wholeness.

The metacrisis we are living through is not simply a collection of separate crises to be solved in isolation but a single, interconnected rupture. It is the unraveling and fraying of the relational fabric that once held us together. To mend it, we must first understand how it came to be so torn apart.

LIFE IS RELATIONSHIP

Think about the last time you felt angry with someone. Maybe they showed up late to an important meeting, stepped on your toe without apologizing, or ate the last piece of cake you had been

saving and looking forward to all day. Chances are that interaction stayed with you. It lingered until, in the presence of someone who cared, you were able to say what needed to be said and feel understood. This gesture began to set things right.

Relationships matter.

Even when we are alone, we are connected to the air we breathe, the food we eat, the sunlight on our skin, and the ache we carry in our hearts. We may not always feel it, but we live inside a web of mutuality. We affect our surroundings, and our surroundings, in turn, affect us. Life, with its consequences, doesn't merely move around us but moves through us. Yet the culture we live in tries to convince us of a different story.

Modern Western society conditions us to focus on what we do. We're measured by our output and defined by our accomplishments. Because agency is prized above all else, we tend to orient around what has been done to us or by us. As a result, we're encouraged to cultivate personal will, individual power, and self-determination, reinforcing an ethos of individualism that rewards status and fuels the addictive pull of success. Most of us know the drill: Hustle. Produce. Compete. Achieve.

However, with this elevation of agency comes its shadows. These unacknowledged burdens tend to manifest as feelings of shame, guilt, or resentment, depending on where we imagine ourselves to be on that scorecard of winners and losers. In an effort to cope with these weighty feelings, we develop the impulse to take rather than to receive. We begin to measure life by quantity instead of honoring the richness of quality. In the process, we not only strip the Earth of its resources but also learn to exploit one another

emotionally, psychologically, and relationally. Gradually, we forget what it means to truly be with one another.

This model of one-way relating reduces others to objects to be managed rather than subjects to engage with. This pattern develops from a worldview based on separation, one that treats people as instruments, ecosystems as extractable resources, and time not as a space to inhabit but as a resource to conquer, optimize, and control. An extractive mindset shapes not only our social systems but also our inner lives. It is the cultural air we breathe.

Even healing spaces, such as therapy and coaching, are not immune. Increasingly, they are becoming tools of optimization, reinforcing the idea that we can bend life to our will. This is evident by the rise of social media influencers who capitalize on collective anxiety by offering branded solutions and expensive courses. Promises of empowerment and self-mastery are marketed in sleek packages, yet what is often sold is agency itself, a sense of personal power wrapped in certainty and offered up in uncertain times.

Of course, agency is important. It is a vital part of human development, after all. But agency alone isn't the whole story. In our modern pursuit of progress, we have lost touch with a far more fundamental way of meeting life. We have drifted from being. Being is as essential as doing. Being allows us to experience our surroundings without demanding they produce or prove anything to us. Being invites rest. Without moments to catch our breath, we grow weary and burn out. Being welcomes patience. Without the capacity to hold space, we rush ahead indiscriminately, and even our best intentions go astray. In other words, without a recognition of being, our attention toward doing becomes untethered,

performative, and even hollow. We go through the motions, but the purpose drains out. We may appear engaged, but something crucial is missing. We lose the sense of alignment that tells us we are truly here, and that loss feels urgent.

Take modern healthcare, for example. How often do we worry about whether we can afford the medical care we need or whether we have access to it at all? How frequently do we feel unseen or unheard when our treatment is reduced to checklists or rushed physical exams? While these experiences may not happen all the time, they occur enough for us to feel like something is wrong. And it is not only patients who feel the strain.

The imbalance in attention is just as evident on the caregiving side. Medical professionals, overwhelmed by impossible workloads, are pressured to prioritize efficiency with little time to really connect with the people they serve. Healing becomes mechanical. Care, once grounded in relationship, loses its heart. The result is a system that leaves everyone, patients and medical providers alike, underserved and overextended.

Sadly, this pattern of time and connection imbalance is not confined to healthcare. It echoes across nearly every sector of modern society. In education, genuine learning is sacrificed for standardized metrics, and curiosity is stifled by the pressure to perform well on tests and grades. In politics, nuanced dialogue is replaced by sound bites, and ideological warfare drowns out any hope for collaboration. In our economies, human dignity is subordinated to productivity, and profit becomes the sole measure of success. Even in our most intimate relationships, the transactional mindset seeps in, reducing love to roles and emotional

scorekeeping rather than allowing it to remain a living field of mutual respect and reciprocal care.

Beneath all of this runs a shared undercurrent of disconnection, a cultural forgetting of what it means to genuinely be in relationship—to listen, to empathize, and, above all, to be and belong.

THE BIAS TOWARD NARROW ATTENTION

A transactional way of reacting to the world has become so normalized that we rarely question it. We move at a pace that flattens complexity and overwhelms our nervous systems. We reach for quick fixes to deep-seated problems, and as a result, we lose touch not only with ourselves but also with one another and with the living world that sustains us. While we may feel disconnection emotionally in the form of anxiety or depression or interpret it intellectually as apathy or confusion, its roots are perceptual. The issue is not what we know but *how* we are relating to what we know—and what that way of attending makes possible.

Iain McGilchrist, a psychiatrist and philosopher, has written extensively about how our modern worldview has taken shape. According to his theory of the divided brain, our culture privileges a narrow, focused mode of attention, more characteristic of the left hemisphere. Although both hemispheres participate in meaning-making, a distinction we will explore later in the book, for now, it is helpful to understand that the left hemisphere primarily attends to what can be conceptually grasped and manipulated. It therefore favors abstraction, linearity, and

analysis. When this mode of attention dominates, the world is increasingly approached as a collection of discrete parts, categorized and engaged instrumentally, and gradually detached from the wider relational and contextual field that gives those parts their meaning.¹

For instance, within modern economic frameworks, nature is viewed largely as a set of resources to be extracted. Forests become “timber,” rivers become “water supply,” and human labor becomes “human capital.” By abstracting life into measurable units, we gain efficiency but lose reverence for the living, interconnected world that makes life possible.

This same pattern shows up in our personal lives as well, when we objectify one another. We label people with “anxiety disorders,” “avoidant attachments,” or “narcissism,” collapsing a human being into a fixed concept. What might otherwise be an opportunity for genuine contact and authentic connection instead becomes a narrowing of the relational space, shaped by power and control.

Yet this is only one way of perceiving. Its counterpart, the right hemisphere, is different but complementary. It tends to open toward broad, contextual awareness, attuning to patterns and to how parts belong within a living whole. When this mode of attention is predominant, it is grounded in direct, embodied experience and supports a more relational, rather than instrumental, way of attending.² When we engage in broader attention, rather than simply labeling someone, we begin to see a human being managing their energy in relation to each context: an anxious person as someone who has lost internal or external support; an avoidant person as someone who has withdrawn to conserve energy; or a

narcissistic person as someone who has walled themselves off to protect against further perceived harm. As these fixed categories soften, the complexity of the relationship opens into a meeting with what is alive and real between us.

Unfortunately, modern life has tilted too far in one direction, toward favoring narrow attention. If the brain is a symphony, the right hemisphere is the conductor, and the left is the first violin. We have handed the baton to the violinist and asked him to lead the entire orchestra. The result is an orchestra, our modern culture, playing out of tune and out of rhythm with life itself.

You may feel this dissonance when you become fixated on trying to solve a problem, perhaps between you and another person, and a sense of vitality begins to disappear. You attend closely to the details, refining and adjusting to get them right. However, the more you focus, the more the larger context falls from view. What you're doing may seem coherent on its own, but the life has gone out of it.

This is what happens when attention has narrowed so completely that the wider field is lost. Without the right hemisphere's ability to hold context, meaning fragments. Nuance, emotion, and relational depth fade, and what remains is technically accurate but strangely flat. In trying to fix the problem, we inadvertently sever the very thread that connects us and brings us into harmony with a whole.

While our inner fragmentation becomes mirrored in the world around us, our cultural predicament won't be solved by doubling down on the very patterns that created it. What we need instead is to cultivate balanced attention, not just widening what we pay attention to but changing how we relate to what we perceive. As

we begin to attend to the whole, our perception shifts. We recognize that we are not isolated individuals but intricately interwoven beings. Relationship is not peripheral to life. *It is life*. It must be remembered, nurtured, and restored.

This relational work begins by reconnecting to our own being through the cultivation of presence. Unlike mindfulness as it is usually practiced today, the presence we will cultivate in this book is more than a technique. It is a way of meeting the world. Based on Gestalt Practice, it involves developing embodied awareness by directing attention to our sensations, emotions, surroundings, and the mental patterns and narratives through which we make meaning.

When doing and being come into balance through presence, we remember our relatedness—the felt sense that we are always in relationship with ourselves, each other, the Earth, and the larger systems that shape us and are shaped by us. As we begin to feel into this existential truth, we soften and then open. We begin to honor what is easily overlooked: The quality of our connections is as important as, if not more than, the number of connections we make. When we value how we show up for one another, a different kind of intelligence begins to emerge, not simply cognitive intelligence but relational intelligence. Relational intelligence is the wisdom we seek when we feel distance between ourselves and the world around us, for it is the capacity to hold, attune, respond, and integrate that closes this gap.

When presence begins to settle within us, we reach outward and start to embrace mutuality, and a bidirectional flow of presence starts to move between us, nourishing us and carrying us further

than we could ever go on our own. From there, we are invited to cultivate coherence, the integrity that arises when our inner and outer worlds align with a shared purpose among us.

Fortunately, the guidance we need to begin this restoration is not far away. It lives within our bodies, embedded in the fabric of relationships, waiting patiently to be remembered. As we continue down this path into the Communal Heart, we will explore various qualities of relational intelligence with more intention and depth—specifically, presence, mutuality, and coherence.

THE APPRECIATION OF DIFFERENCE

One of the most frequent complaints I hear from new mothers in my psychotherapy practice is their surprise, and often frustration, that their partners, usually a husband or boyfriend, can sleep through the sound of a crying baby at night. Likewise, many women share that they seem to carry the emotional pulse of the household, while the men in their lives appear more concerned with practical things.

Of course, these role divisions are not universal or fixed. More and more men are stepping into primary caregiving roles, staying home with young children as their partners pursue professions outside the home. Yet even in these more progressive arrangements, many working mothers still report holding the bulk of the relational labor. They tend not only to their children's needs but also to the emotional dynamics of extended family, friendships, and professional relationships, all while wondering out loud whether the fathers of their children even care.

When I press further, however, a more nuanced picture emerges. These men do care, and they attempt to show it by focusing on different domains, such as maintaining physical systems of the home and managing household risk. So, the problem isn't always a lack of concern; it's a difference in what is being noticed, prioritized, and then acted upon.

While contemporary neuroscience has not found reliable evidence that men and women differ in hemispheric dominance or in the fundamental attentional and perceptual modes described in McGilchrist's divided-brain theory, behavioral research does suggest consistent group-level differences in what men and women tend to find most salient or engaging. On average, men are more likely to orient attention toward how things work, while women are more often attuned to how people relate.³ These general patterns are neither random nor purely socially constructed, even as culture influences how they are expressed. When viewed through an evolutionary lens, they begin to make sense.

Because human infants are born exceptionally dependent, early caregiving contexts placed a premium on heightened sensitivity to emotional and nonverbal cues. Survival in these conditions depended on the caregiver's capacity for attunement—the ability to notice, feel into, and respond sensitively to an infant's internal state through sustained presence. This form of relational intelligence precedes language and plays a central role in supporting physiological regulation and the development of secure attachment.

At the same time, early caregiving placed mothers and infants in conditions of profound vulnerability and exposure. Across many

small-scale societies, with considerable variation across ecologies, this vulnerability was buffered through complementary divisions of labor, often including males in provisioning and protection from external threats. These roles favored a more goal-directed mode of attention, one that organizes perception around outcomes, making instrumental agency not only possible but often primary, in service of the safety of kin and community.

Together, these complementary modes of attention form a dynamic polarity that appears repeatedly in human social life: one oriented toward relational presence, the other to instrumental agency. While historically emphasized differently in women and men, they are neither fixed traits nor exclusive. Rather, they are shared human capacities whose integration has been essential to the survival and flourishing of early human groups.⁴

Although these attentional tendencies remain necessary for human coherence, modern Western culture has, over time, increasingly privileged one mode of attention over the other, favoring mechanistic objectification over relational attunement. Our collective attention has tilted toward how things work, while the art of how we get along has faded into the background. To point out this imbalance is not a critique of men, *per se*, but an honest acknowledgment of how biology, history, and cultural design have configured the architecture of modern life. For millennia, public domains such as governance, economics, and science were structured almost exclusively by male participation. In the United States, for example, it has been just over a century since women were granted the right to vote and participate formally in public discourse.⁵ Because most of our modern systems were built

predominantly by men and shaped by a mode of attention oriented toward instrumental agency, we have been culturally trained to analyze and then construct. However, this emphasis frequently comes at the expense of staying connected to the broader field of meaning that arises through relationship, emotional nuance, and contextual awareness. The result is a world brimming with tools yet starving for tenderness.⁶

Given this history, it is no surprise that many of our dominant institutional structures are shaped by a narrow, goal-directed mode of attention—one that has undeniably fueled extraordinary advances in science, technology, and governance. Yet in the process, other vital ways of knowing have been sidelined, particularly the relational, contextual, and life-affirming capacities that likely evolved under caregiving pressures and are therefore often associated with the feminine. These capacities arise from a broader, more receptive mode of awareness, one attuned not only to outcomes, but to the web of relationships that sustain life.

The deeper issue, for this book and for our culture, is not whether the masculine and feminine tendencies neatly map onto left- and right-hemispheric modes of attention, nor whether mechanistic and relational orientations appear more often in men and women. Those questions are important, but they are not the most pressing ones. What's at stake is what begins to unravel when these capacities fall out of balance, regardless of who carries them. When abstraction is consistently elevated above relationship, and agency valued over attunement, we lose touch with the very qualities that make connection and meaning possible. Presence fades. Responsiveness gives way to efficiency

alone. And we forget that these relational capacities are not luxuries but essential conditions for sustaining life—individually, collectively, and culturally.⁷

THE CALL OF THE COMMUNAL HEART

The good news is that we are not bound by these inherited patterns. As human beings, we carry an innate capacity to interrupt them, to choose differently, and to begin again. By bringing into awareness what was once unconscious, we can begin to integrate our different ways of perceiving into a more coherent and animating whole, first within ourselves and then within the systems we co-create. In other words, we can learn to broaden our attention to include the whole field: to listen not only to what is spoken but to the way meaning speaks through us. By attuning to what is felt, intuited, and sensed beneath the surface, we begin to relate not merely through roles or functions but through presence. To be, not just to do.

Many of us have had a taste of this when we needed it most. After a long, difficult day, we come home, drop our bags, and sink into a chair with a heavy sigh. A friend or partner walks in, not with advice or solutions, but sits beside us. With their balanced attention fully on us, they convey, “I’m here with you.” They don’t try to solve anything. Perhaps they offer a warm drink or place a gentle hand on our back. In their steady presence, we begin to let go. We feel seen, not for how well we’ve coped or how strong we’ve been, but simply for being human—tired, tender, and trying.

No problem has been solved, but the weight begins to lift. We are no longer alone with our heartache. Moments like these remind us that a deeper and more sustaining way of meeting the world is possible. This is the heart of restoring relational intelligence in our personal lives and across every layer of our culture. By honoring the generative tension between the impulse to assert and the capacity to hold, we bring these two ways of relating into conscious balance. From that balance, a new possibility emerges, not merely more efficient systems but a wiser and more compassionate society.⁸

If the metacrisis we face reflects a rupture in relationship, then the path into the Communal Heart offers a profoundly human response. By broadening our attention, we remember what was never truly lost and return to the relational field that makes healing and wholeness possible.

In Chapter 2, we will explore how the costs of disconnection manifest in our bodies, relationships, and felt sense of belonging in the natural world. Mending the world does not begin with fixing. It begins by becoming intimately acquainted with the fragmentations within, between, and among us.