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Introduction

*Reexamine all that you have been told in school, or in church or in any book.
Dismiss whatever insults your soul.*

– Walt Whitman

The purpose of this book is simple and radical: to support readers like you in doing three things:

- Increase your awareness of what has gotten all of us and you into the kind of unsustainable and mostly unsatisfying existence that we call human life;
- Discover a systematic process that you can learn to apply to undo the effects of socialization and trauma and reclaim your full humanity;
- Learn a way of living in integrity within a world that, in essence, is not changing with you.

If your experience of reading this book is what I hope it will be, you will regain your faith in humanity. You might experience immense compassion and a sense of tragedy about the internal and external alienation we have created and which we pass from generation to generation. You will be inspired and moved by your own and others' basic heroism of surviving childhood. And you will learn much that can help you know what you need to do in order to get the kind of support that can help you make the transformation that will bring you back to yourself, ready to live as you might remember yourself wishing early on in life.

If you want to embark on this journey, I want to stress that this is not exactly or primarily a self-help book. Although it does contain practices, you will likely do better with them if you can get support from others. The practices, as well as the ideas and stories that are in this book, are here in the hope that your desire to live fully will awaken and you will then take additional steps towards yourself, including the ones pointed to within the book.

The title of this book derives from two sources. One is the metaphor which gave rise to this project in the first place: the felt sense I've had for some time that the human fabric has a tear, and that if we let this tear continue, there may come a point of no return. I felt it,

keenly, one night in 1995 when two young men falsely accused me of having run over one of them in an attempt to get me to give them money. I called on every human faculty that I had to try to reach actual engagement between us, and I failed. I never became a person in their eyes as far as I could tell. Within minutes after the interaction was completed, I saw them walking with the ostensible limp mysteriously healed, and I was inconsolable that night. It wasn't blame or judgment; more a sense of helplessness, a tragic alarm at the conditions that pit people against each other in such ways. I wanted to reach them, and didn't know how.

At this time, this tear in the human fabric has reached a state of global crisis characterized by a growing polarity between and within nations, manifesting in complex combinations and juxtapositions of material deprivation and spiritual depletion increasing social disintegration in many parts of the world; a more and more imminent threat to the carrying capacity of the planet; all leading to a persistent possibility of global civilization and population collapse. These phenomena are portrayed daily in the media, and their existence is not hugely controversial.

What's even more frightening to me is that solutions to these crises are often sought within the same set of core beliefs and practices that have contributed to the crises in the first place: more technology is believed to address the problems that technology created, and more capitalism-style development is believed to do away with poverty created by capitalism. Alternative explanations or solutions are regularly dismissed or rejected, often by arguing that the ideas or suggestions cannot be proven, are not cost effective, or are in opposition to human nature. We have effectively bought into a belief that no alternative exists.

I am not willing to settle into this framework, because I haven't lost touch with a vision I've been carrying with me since my childhood. Nor do I believe that I am alone. In fact, I believe that all of us carry somewhere in us a deep longing for and vision of a world that works for all. I frequently encounter traces of this buried vision in the most unexpected moments and places, as soon as someone's heart opens up to love, if nothing else. If this vision and possibility are, indeed, part of who we are, why is it that we have created a world based on separation, scarcity, and powerlessness that barely works for the few?

When this question is asked, more often than not the answer is that it's human nature that has brought us here.

I am here to tell you a different story about who we are, why we got here, and what we can do to move towards our longings for a different world.

I sometimes wonder who is truly naïve – those who think that we cannot trust ourselves to collaborate, and therefore must rely on control, coercion, and incentives, or those who think we can, and that collaborating with nature and with each other are entirely possible. Is it not our reliance on control, coercion, and incentives that has brought us to our current impasse of longing for change and not seeing options, personally and globally, for creating it?

Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness puts forth the bold vision that there is one single key to getting us out of the stuck place we have created. It can open the door to profound changes at all levels, ranging from creating more satisfying personal lives all the way to a world that works for all, in Sharif Abdullah's resonant phrase.

This key is to embrace a major transformation in our relationship with our human needs.

This may be challenging at first. Later, it may come to support every turn in your road.

The first premise underlying this vision is that *all* human needs are fundamentally life-affirming and common to all. There is no need of yours or mine, or of anyone else, for that matter, of which we need feel ashamed. It is only the strategies we pursue to fulfill our needs that can be harmful to others and ourselves, not the needs themselves.

The second premise is that conflicts, suffering, and the many destructive aspects of human life are *all* the result of ignoring, mistrusting, denying, and suppressing rather than understanding, accepting, and embracing our needs.

Learning to use this new way of relating to our needs to guide our choices and actions is the path to a world that works for all.

The full scope of this project is quite ambitious. It rests on the deep faith that what we have created is at odds with – rather than an expression of – our human nature; and that therefore it is entirely possible for us to move towards a future that is more aligned with our core humanity and a social order that is attuned to the core needs of humans and that collaborates with the natural world, without having to control it.

In this book, I focus on our individual existence and what we can do to reclaim our full humanity and live lives of meaning and dignity in a chaotic and complex world.

In this sense, spinning threads is about the individual foundation of any other practice we might want to engage with: each of us is a thread that ultimately can be rewoven into the human fabric.

The other source for the spinning metaphor comes from Gandhi's core practice of spinning, which was intended to be both symbolically and materially a path to reclaiming the power to attend to needs without requiring large institutions. Spinning was also a path to taking action for each person right where they are, which is what I hope we can all do. Lastly, Gandhi's spinning invokes the commitment to nonviolence which informs everything I do and write about. In that sense, this book is an invitation to recover our individual ability to choose nonviolence in the face of difficult circumstances.

I. Transcending the Legacy of Separation

Part One: Transcending the Legacy of Separation, starts with tracing what led us to where we are: the path of negating our needs and emotions. Several thousand years of this path have created a world profoundly at odds with human thriving. The consequences of this path are known to all of us: disconnection from our deepest selves and separation from each other; immense challenges in handling differences and disagreements; and social structures which reinforce separation on all levels.

This is the setting that we want to change, both the internalized legacy and the persistent social structures that reinforce and maintain it, such that each generation anew finds itself gripped in the legacy of a difficult-to-change past.

Understanding the patterns of reproducing the past provides us with some clues, and sets the stage for the concrete invitation to each of us to recover from the powerful burden of socialization and to reclaim freedom and aliveness as well as the capacity to engage critically and lovingly with the world around us. We can liberate ourselves from the legacy of the past, find inner freedom, and cultivate a radical consciousness that calls into question what we have inherited and reclaims the capacity to envision and the courage to live out our vision. Once awakened to our human needs, we can embrace the practice of

nonviolence through honoring our own and others' humanity in full by focusing on everyone's needs.

II. Pioneering a Future of Collaboration

Once we are on the path to liberating ourselves, Part Two: Pioneering a Future of Collaboration, outlines how each of us can become a one-person model of what life could be like. This is no small task, since any social reality has mechanisms that make it resistant to change and that will continue to put pressure on each individual to adapt back into it. This is why we need guidelines that we can lean on. Making needs central entirely reshapes how we relate to others. Resolving conflicts, supporting each other, knowing how to love, offering each other feedback when our needs are not met, and just about every aspect of relationship take on a new light when filtered through the lens of human needs. We shift from evaluating, judging, and the either/or way of living into an open-hearted commitment to make things work for everyone involved in any situation.

Key to this possibility is the core insight that conflicts only take place at the level of strategies, because, contrary to just about everything our culture tells us, human needs are not in conflict. With a modicum of skill and/or support from uninvolved parties, every conflict situation can turn into a shared exploration of which human needs are at the root of everyone's actions, opinions, and perceptions. When done in partnership, such explorations yield a shift into goodwill, which tends to result in mutually viable ways of attending to both parties' human needs and finding strategies that maximize meeting as many of them as possible. When done internally, such exploration tends to transform antagonism into empathy for another person, which can already create a profound shift in the relationship even without that person's collaboration.

This book, as you may recall, is only one part of the project I initially started. Our work doesn't end with changing ourselves. Especially given how much effort is required to maintain the changes we embrace, even for many of us to work on ourselves is not going to be sufficient to create the future we want. No amount of individual change alone will suffice to change the rules of the game – the way our institutions are set up – that make it so difficult to live a life of integrity, meaning, and love. Even improving our relationships will not be enough. If we are going to change those social structures, we will need

to grapple with them directly. At least some of us will need to work together with others to create systemic change. For this, I invite you to look at my second book, *Reweaving Our Human Fabric*, where I take on the task of showing us how we can work together for change, and paint a detailed picture of what the world to come could look like.

Why This Book

In addition to a revolutionary view of human nature, this book offers practical and concrete suggestions for:

- Overcoming the effects of the stultifying socialization so many of us endured;
- Restoring our capacity for meaningful relationships with self and others; and
- Putting nonviolence into practice in all areas of life.

This is a book for an era in which many feel profoundly afraid of the future and baffled by how to help our culture meet the challenges we are facing. Whether you are a political activist, an organizational consultant, or “simply” a human being trying to live your life with integrity and meaning, this book will offer you unexpected hope. By challenging some core assumptions about the nature of being human and what is possible for humanity, and by inviting you into a luminous vision of a livable future, this book invites you on a new journey, one that can profoundly alter how you live, relate, and work.

How to Read this Book

I hope that anyone reading this will feel free to follow their own curiosity and not be constrained by the order in which I have written the book. For example, I realize that some people are fascinated by how our civilization got to this point, while others may find the history or analysis of people like Freud and Marx not relevant for their own inquiries. You may want to skip that section (Section One), and perhaps read first about how our childhood upbringings made us who we are today (Section Two). If you then find yourself curious about how our civilization got here, you could then go back to Section One, or skip it altogether.

There are a number of different styles in the book: for memoir and my personal story, you can go to the sections headed “Early

Hardships” and “Finding Me Finding Vision.” If you want my teaching and experience about how to respond to the hard emotions of shame, despair, anger, and grief, you can go straight to the section “Strategic Discomfort.” And so on. Happy traveling!