

The
COMMUNAL
HEART

A RETURN TO BELONGING
IN A WORLD PULLING US APART

CLAUDIA DOMMASCHK


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First Edition

To those who come after us

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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 that over 80 percent of Gen Z users who engage with AI chatbots said, if given the choice, they would marry their bots over a real person.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