

Natalie Knapp

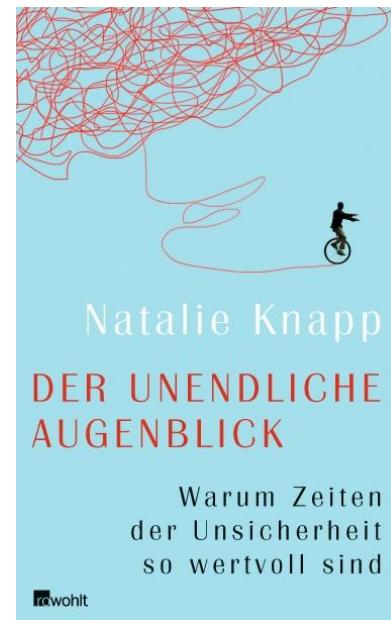
The Never-Ending Moment: The Value of Uncertainty

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When confronted with change, we often feel vulnerable and insecure as we're forced to leave the familiar behind us without knowing what will take its place. But these kinds of transitions also create personal spaces in which something new can develop. In humans, people going through puberty are often seen as difficult to deal with yet also as very creative. From a societal perspective, periods of upheaval like the Renaissance nourish the development of revolutionary ideas.

In this thoughtful and thought-provoking work, philosopher Natalie Knapp urges us not to simply put periods of transition behind us as quickly as possible, but rather to appreciate their value. It is these phases in our lives, she argues, in which we sense life itself with a particular intensity. They activate our creative potential and lead us towards discoveries and experiences that in turn provide a sense of direction in calmer, more settled times. How people deal with experiences of change, she argues, has a dramatic influence on quality of life.

Natalie Knapp shows how new possibilities are born out of biological, personal and historical crises, and how philosophy can help us to become sensitive to them.



NATALIE KNAPP was born in 1970, studied philosophy, literature, religious philosophy and history of religion. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Heidegger, Derrida and Rilke, and works as a freelance writer. As an advisor on philosophy, she gives seminars and lectures in Germany, Switzerland and other European countries. Her previous book *New Thinking* was published in 2013.

- A philosopher on the creative potential of a crisis and why uncertain times are so valuable.
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The Never-Ending Moment: The Value of Uncertainty

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You know how everyone says seize the moment? Well, I think it's the other way around — the moment seizes us.

Richard Linklater (Boyhood, 2014)

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Introduction

Transitions are a challenge. Whether they are connected with birth, puberty, changes of jobs, farewells or illnesses, there are times where we cross the threshold from what we know into uncertainty. We often view such passages with tension or fear since we don't know how we will master them or what they hold in store for us.

Transitions are phases of life in which we feel uncertain and instable, on the one hand, but develop unsuspected strength, on the other. These periods are among the most precious experiences in our lives because they contain a creative potential that can only be activated in such limited, intermediary spaces.

Transitions are spaces of creative freedom that inevitably entail renewal. They are phases in which life develops far greater power than usual and can be sensed with much greater intensity. Transitions are the *poetic zones* of life, and how we react to them has a huge influence on our quality of life. Such periods often reveal the depths of our souls, the potential that can be maintained and developed in calmer years to come.

It's particularly easy to see the conditions and demands of creative transitions in nature. The border between fields and forests is usually characterized by particularly lush vegetation. Such ecological transitions are places for creatively encountering nature. They contain flora and fauna of both neighboring biotopes as well as rarer forms of life that only flourish in the special transitional zone. Macrobiotic farmers have long since discovered that they can be invaluable incubators that renew nature. For that reason they need to be preserved. The biological diversity in marginal and transitional areas, together with the fact that they are permanently under threat, remind us that we should pay particular attention to such exceptional zones.

My most immediate concern is to illustrate what we can learn from nature, from its spatial and seasonal transitions, from the transformations within individual life forms and the entire biosphere. No system has been researched longer or more comprehensively than nature. Investigating and observing nature and trying to draw analogies is the best way getting new impulses for how to live our own lives. It can serve as a inspiration for individual people and for society, teaching us more intelligent ways of dealing with the complex demands of modern civilization. We should never forget that our lives are intimately bound up with and cannot be separated from the large-scale cycles of nature. "Thousands of times greater in space and time is

the third of our worlds, the biosphere, the totality of all life, plastered like a membrane over all of earth, writes American biologist Edward O. Wilson. "The biosphere has its own epic cycles. Humanity, one of the countless species forming the biosphere, can perturb it, but we cannot leave it or destroy it without perishing ourselves.... But for each careless step we take, our species will ultimately pay an unwelcome price—always."

For that reason the most ingenious and lasting solutions to the problems of modern life have been oriented around the holistic strategies of nature. They have been tested for the past fifty years all over the world and have proved a massive success. Their discoverers learned to work *with* and not against nature.

We can use what they learned to draw analogies and come up with new ways of seeing the difficult passages in our own lives. If we understand what they mean and why we need them, we can reshape them and deal with their negative side-effects in a more relaxed fashion.

Every transition is individual and unique. Nonetheless, there are patterns that we can recognize and that can help us to stand up to difficulties. It is worth consciously experiencing uncomfortable and even painful processes and letting them affect us so that they can unfold their creative potential.

I would like to encourage you get connected, especially in times of uncertainty, with the creative power of life.

Part I: METAMORPHOSES

Chapter 1: The Message of Spring - Why hope is rational

"Something first has to come into view before it's there. I would say that something moves out of the future. There is a cause but that cause rests in the future. Logically the effect on the present is there before the cause can be found in the future."

Josef Beuys

Even before I open my eyes in the dim light, I hear the song, full-throated and clear, as if this blackbird had nothing else to do than to twitter melodies, feel the strength in its own voice and greet the coming spring. From then on everything is brighter and warmer and greener. It feels like this delicate but penetrating song could bring the grey winter landscape back to life.

The beginning of spring is the most impressive transition in the natural world because it inverts the force of nature so forcefully from within to without. In winter, nature withdraws its strength inward as a way of conserving life with a minimum of effort. In spring, that process is reversed, and nature spreads out in every direction. The germ buds break through the protective cases of seeds, and nature unfolds its creative possibilities. The strength for this reversal arises from the natural tension between darkness and light, cold and warmth. If temperatures and the hours of sunshine rise to a certain level, this strength is unleashed, and the fullness of life, which was previously concealed within the earth and winter dens of hibernation, reveals itself to our senses in a sudden, overpowering sequence, beginning with the morning and evening concerts of the birds and followed by the gentle fragrance of seas of white, yellow and pink flowers, the shimmering green of new grass and the warmth of the first rays of sunshine on our faces. We crave activity and participation in the reproduction of everything that is alive. As soon as the first signs of spring arrive, we leave our homes, strip off our winter coats and walk toward the light, renewed. We sit and chat in street-side cafés, work full of energy in our gardens, and talk walks, lost in thought, along blossoming fields and through reawakening forests.

Although we knew during the winter that the light would return and nature would blossom once again once spring arrived, the sheer force of the phenomenon always surprises us. The strength of reawakening life is greater than anything we could imagine in the darkness of winter.

Hope is rational. That is the message of spring.

The first transition of the year also has something else to teach us. We appreciate the beauty of nature independent of its utility. Delicate cherry blossoms bloom even though their future fate is completely undetermined. They don't first look beautiful when they have been transformed into cherries. Should they freeze during a cold night before pollination and be unable to produce fruit, they are still just as perfect.

This may sound somewhat sobering, but this lesson is very significant for our attempts to deal with our own life transitions. We're a lot like cherry blossoms. We don't know our future. We have no idea whether it will bear any fruit that will satisfy ourselves or others. In moments of transition we feel delicate and vulnerable. Will we adjust to our role as parents after the birth of our first child? Will we overcome our sadness when a loved-one has passed away? Will we survive a serious illness? Will we be able to restart our careers after getting fired? Uncertainty unsettles us. We're afraid of failing, afraid of making the wrong decision or taking on too much or too little. It's normal to feel fears like these. They're a sign that we're paying more attention. Mountain climber Reinhold Messner said that for him fear was one key to survival.

The problem is not fear, but rather the fact that fear paralyzes us, if we haven't learned to see it for what it is – that's the opinion of educational scientist and expert Reinhard Kahl. Kahl says that he used to think a good school was one in which the pupils weren't afraid. Now, he's convinced that a good school is one in which children are allowed to be afraid and advised on how to deal with it.

If we had been raised like this, we would realize that fear awakens us and sharpens our senses. It's not an indication that we've made a mistake or are about to blunder in some way. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a mistake during a transitional phase since categories like "correct" and "false" can only be applied in situations that are repeated numerous times. They are more applicable to simple mathematical tasks than to unique individuals in unique life situations.

No one can say for sure whether it would have been better for us to have lived the one life we have any differently. No one can say precisely what consequences different decisions would have had. Maybe we would have been more displeased. Developments are always influenced by accidents and unforeseeable events. We tend to construct hypothetical "better" lives in retrospect, forgetting that this is an artificially simplified idea of life in which all possible incidents and the complexity of interrelated events have been removed. Who says that we would have been healthier if we had chosen a different form of therapy? Who says that a different relationship, career or life would have in fact made us happier?

Throughout history, philosophers have thought a lot about this unsettling phenomenon. "No man can cross the same river twice," the Greek philosopher Heraclitus proclaimed. Every

person represents something new and unique in the world, proposed Hannah Arendt around 2500 years later. For that reason, we are the only ones who can try out our own special individual life constellations, and disappointing results are not necessarily the products or wrong decisions. They do, however, offer the opportunity to enter into a new dialogue with our lives as they currently are. Arendt even opined that the interaction between our own unpredictability and the unpredictability of life was what opened up space for us to maneuver in every situation. Arendt wrote: "The fact that human beings can act in the sense of starting over can only mean that they withdraw from all predictability and calculability, that in this case the improbable becomes probable, and that what is calculably "rational" cannot be expected, but can be hoped for."

It's therefore clever to assume that we are doing the right thing as we try our best with the means that we currently have at our disposal.

It is difficult to accept that our attitudes – and not the results we achieve – decide whether we can live in peace with our current situations. Only if we accept what is unavoidable, can we open up and extend our hand to a still indeterminate future. What may seem like a catastrophe today may appear to be a lucky stroke of fortune, a deciding turning point in our lives, a few days or years from now.

Hope

You will recall from the first chapter that hope reflects the light of the future in the present and directs us down a practicable path. Whereas trust is based on past experience, hope derives courage from what is to come. Trust and hope are twin forms of confidence. Both capabilities have a function centrally important to life itself. They can't always be clearly distinguished from one another since only the two together allow us to experience any given moment without fear...

Hannah Arendt taught we are allowed to maintain hope at all times because we are capable of acting and can therefore contribute to a new beginning. Even if *practical* courses of action seem impossible, we can act *mentally* by changing our perspective and experiencing our life circumstances in a different way. Mental action also has effects. In most cases, hope manifests itself not as passive waiting for better days but in a step that deviates from our own habits. Or

perhaps we are waiting for the perfect moment. "If you hit me, I'll kill you," Andreas Egger says to his uncle in the film "An Entire Life." This act of rebellion expressed the hope for a better future. Egger doesn't know how things will proceed since his behavior breaks the normal routine, but he stands up for himself because at that particular moment, he thinks change is possible.

"It is part of the nature of every beginning that comes over the world unexpectedly and unpredictably, measured against what has been and what has happened in the past," Arendt wrote. "The unpredictability of an event is inherent in all beginnings and all origins. The creation of the earth and all life on it, the development of human beings as a result of evolving animal species, indeed the entire framework of our real existence is based on 'infinite improbabilities'...Every new beginning contradicts statistically measureable probabilities. That's why it always seems to us...like a miracle." It is the unpredictability of life that allows us to act hopefully, even if the future we desire looks unlikely ever to materialize. If life were predictable, there would be no basis for this sort of hope.

Acceptance

The Greek philosopher Epictetus was a liberated slave who was famous for his extreme calm. He was deeply convinced what causes human suffering is not the real demands of life, but the fact that we see them as demands and are unable to change that. Therefore, his most important counsel was to distinguish between things we can change and things we cannot. If we stop trying to change what is immutable, he proposed, we'd be better off.

Epictetus' own life seems to bear out his words. According to one anecdote, he didn't even lose his cool when his master beat him so viciously that he suffered a broken thigh. The master had the power to break a slave's bones, in Epictetus' view, but not to damage his dignity...

The capability to accept what cannot be changed is a crucial element of human beings learning to deal with traumatic experiences and emerging stronger rather than being destroyed. That's according to British psychologist and trauma researcher Stephen Joseph. If we accept the uncertainty and ambivalence of life as a basic principle and don't expect to be spared unhappiness, pain, sadness, regret, disappointment and stress, we are better able to get through difficult times and may even develop a special reservoir of strength.

The strengthening effect of crisis has been described as “post-traumatic growth,” a personal developmental spurt as a result of a traumatic experience. Traumatic experiences are defined as existential shocks that dramatically shake a person’s entire biological, neurological and psychological system so that the individual feels totally overwhelmed. They can be the results of accidents, acts of violence, unexpected deaths or long-term childhood neglect. The consequences may include holes in a blank spaces in memory, obsessive ideas, emotional chaos, a pounding heartbeat or insomnia that can persist for months or even years...

According to Joseph, the people who have the most trouble dealing with trauma are those who feel responsible for it in some way – perhaps because they survived while others didn’t, or they think they didn’t do enough to help, or they assume that they could have prevented a misfortune. Such people are incapable of accepting loss of control as an aspect of life and remain trapped in endlessly repeating questions of culpability. Equally unproductive in the long term are all forms of avoiding or repressing issues by becoming dependent on alcohol, pills or work.

In order to recover, i.e. to experience post-traumatic growth, three things are needed:

- 1) A person has to confront reality rather than denying or repressing it.
- 2) A person must accept the misfortune that happened as an unpleasant part of life.
- 3) A person must accept responsibility for how he or she will continue to live.

The point is to experience how much room we have to maneuver and act even in difficult moments and how a change of perspective can positively improve our situation. According to Joseph, people are not passive observers of their lives. Their sensibilities and attitudes toward events have enormous influence over whether and how they recover...

In order to grow as the result of a crisis, it’s not enough to use positive thinking as a way of getting over loss or to simply believe that every cloud has a silver lining. The point is much more to accept the full extent of your pain and to start anew. You have to say: I recognize that a hurricane has devastated my life. I accept that I have been fired. I recognize that this love of mine has failed. I wish it were different. My youth is over and no operation in the world can restore it. This sort of genuine acceptance yields the simple but crucial question: This or that has happened, but what am I going to do about it now?

Vitality

Vitality arises whenever a movement, an encounter or a contact surprises us. It can be neither mechanically created nor controlled. To feel vital, we have to accept the risk of making mistakes. Vitality is the opposite of routine...

And precisely that is our culture's problem. Making mistakes or failing to achieve a set end isn't allowed. We value what works, and what doesn't gets optimized. Illness and old-age are often perceived as failures. That ultimately leads us to forget ever increasingly what it feels like to be vital. We ossify in the repetition of familiar routines processes.

When life forces us to reorient ourselves, we feel overwhelmed. We've forgotten how to deal with situations that don't have any predetermined plans and processes and how to support other people who are in that situation. What we experience in times of crisis is a very mild form of what dementia sufferers go through. We no longer recognize our own lives. The fear of making mistakes grows, and a vicious circle results. Because we no longer dare to reveal anything about ourselves, the encounters we need to feel alive no longer take place.

Thus in times of uncertainty, it's important to pick up on something familiar that gives us a sense of vitality and that can then further develop on its own...

In childhood and especially during puberty, parents, a girlfriend or a kindly teacher can become anchors of trust. The knowledge that there is no shame in failure bolsters the life impulse that allows us to confront new challenges.

In situations of conflict, which are a main cause of uncertainty, we usually only find a solution when we recognize that despite our differing beliefs, we are all quite similar on a human level. This similarity is crucial because it enables us to talk with one another about our differences and perhaps even to see them as enriching.

A friend's son who had just returned from a school exchange program in Africa once said that he was most impressed by the fact that African young people faced the same problems and liked to discuss the same things as German ones. Both groups talked about friends, pimples, clothes and the latest music. And of course both suffered the occasional heartbreaks. These surprising similarities dispelled any fear my friend's son may have had about the foreign

environment, language and food. Years later, he told me that the school exchange had been one of the most important experiences of his entire life. It was there, he said, that he had learned that all people are similar because they're human beings.

Most of the time, however, we don't trust our ability to pick up on similarities and to allow ourselves to be enriched and transformed by what is foreign. We are only interested in change insofar as it helps us optimize routines. We believe that technology, monitoring and medical progress can help eradicate death and loss until at some point we notice that that's not the case. People die, relationships fall apart, experiments fail, and appliance break down. It is precisely this unpleasant experiences that allow us to discover the capability that actually keeps us alive. We recognize that we're able to transform the familiar into something new and develop a sense of familiarity with things that are now. The ability enables us to overcome crises and deal with disruptions...

At every level, our lives depend on reconciling contradictory impulses: transformative power and consistency, solidarity and openness, defense of our own identities and the ability to adopt foreign elements in order to change and renew ourselves. Life is a balancing act between transformation and preservation, between risk and security. As a wise person once said, life is "always of the edge, permanently threatened with dissolution, never perfect and - precisely because it constantly threatens to fail - a motor of imagination, creativity and potential creation." In this sense, vitality also entails the adaptation of the world." We possess this capacity because we are living organisms. It motivates us and enables us to open up, make contact and encounter others.

When life compels us to make a undesired change, we often perceive this as failure. But the pain it generates gives us insight into of the most fundamental rules of life. If you want to feel the force of being alive, you have to risk yourself - not virtually or for the sake of having a moving experience, but in reality.

Back to the Source of Vitality

In times of crisis we often perceive our longing for vitality as pain, numb emptiness or addiction. Pain tells us that something isn't right, emptiness indicates that something is missing, and as an endless, insatiable need, every addiction is akin to searching in then wrong place. People can be addicted to work, sex, intoxication, entertainment and consumerism. They can be

addicted to buying bigger, better and faster cars, looking for the perfect relationship or staring at their mobile phones. They may crave distraction, information, the Internet or attention.

Addiction uses up our vitality and prevents us from sensing what it could mean to us.

The way out of the vicious circle of addiction leads in the main through the gateway of boredom. You recall: boredom is the first step in sensitizing our jaded senses. Only when our perception becomes more intense, do we sense that we possess our *own* lifetime. Those who cease distracting themselves quickly notice that they want to do something with their lives, something nourishing and significant, even if they can't say precisely what that is.

"Everything that gives life meaning goes beyond the ego and its needs," writes the philosopher Ariadne von Schirach. Such things include human company, risk, passion, devotion, bravery and love. "There has to be something worth sticking up for," she writes, "instead of sitting back and watching with mounting horror as everything seems to go to the dogs." It takes a while for our senses to open and the appreciation for the preciousness of our own lifetimes, which we inevitably share with others, to return.

Occasionally the gateway of fear will appear instead of the gateway of boredom. At the end of an epoch, many of our structures of addiction are also parts of our collective repression of imminent catastrophe. We repress the fact that things have changed and that we are unable to continue on as before. Only when we free ourselves from the confines of collective repression, can we see the true condition of our culture. That's frightening. But only those who pass through the gateway of fear will arrive at that source which nourishes life and gives us the strength to pick ourselves back up again. This is our ability to be vital. It is our biological, psychological and spiritual dowry, and it is constantly at our disposal. But it's up to us to decide what we do with it. "The way the world is depends on the behavior of every individual person," a perceptive mind once said. "That is the answer we give to our being here, and that is the responsibility that being alive entails."

Everything We Need is There

This book began with hope, and it will end with hope as well. Everything we need is there: ideas, initiatives, people who want to leave behind a better world for their grandchildren and scientists to accompany the project of cultural transformation.

Social psychologist Harald Welzer is one of those people. He has proposed thinking about the present from the point of view of the future - envisioning how we would in fact like to live and then to doing what's necessary to get there. The idea is to import the future into the present. Those who want less noise pollution from airplane and automobile traffic should fly less often and give up their cars. Those who want there to be fish in the ocean should give up eating seafood for the next ten years. Those who want to have clean air and water in the future should only buy products which they really need and which can be repaired or recycled. Every newly made product places more of a burden on our air and water than something reused.

Recently, while taking the train, I overheard two businesswomen discussing how often they used their iPads.

"At the start, I took it along on trips," the first one said. "But now it just lies around."

"I only use mine to watch two football matches simultaneously," responded the other.

To Welzer's way of thinking, these are the sorts of products we can forgo without any sense of loss. They weren't invented because people needed them, but solely because they could be sold.

If we think about the present from the perspective of the future, the point is no longer to come up with innovative products or to optimize energy-efficient refrigerators or electric cars. The goal is a different way of life. We only disguise our problem by exchanged outmoded technologies for ostensibly more ecological ones.

We continue to be oriented around the past, driven by our desires for more and better products and larger apartments. Despite ecologically optimized technology, we consume ever greater amounts of energy and national resources. Welzer says the future would look brighter if we had "fewer rather than better products." Rather than investing more energy we should use less

of it. He should convert, conserve and share what we already have. Everything we need is there. In Welzer's view, the challenge for future generations of designers is to figure out how to give clothes, buildings and furniture new uses and coax a new beauty out of them.

Reduce, reuse and recycle. Share, give away, lend, combine ideas, use objects for multiple purposes and work together. The basic principles of perma-culture can be put into practice in all realms of society. They stimulate our grey cells and encourage creativity, communication, keenness of perception and aesthetic sensibility. A great many people already live like this, with great delight, since it creates space in their lives for what which goes beyond their egos and gives their existence meaning.

The future demands a lifestyle and aesthetic of "less is more." The earth's natural resources will not support further expansion. The only open question is whether we will be forced by catastrophe to reduce our demands or whether we will actively introduce the future into the present and revise all aspects of our lives as we would have them under real existing circumstances. Design instead of disaster is Welzer's formula for the future.

Since we are all communally responsible for social problems, not everyone has to develop an individual vision for every aspect of life. We can divide up this labor. In their book *Transformation Design*, Welzer and Cultural Studies expert Bernd Sommer make a plethora of concrete suggestions about how to transform the economy, human mobility, nutrition, the use of time, property and social structures. The ideas of this pair of academics run parallel to the practical experiences of socially minded entrepreneurs, the tried-and-tested knowledge of macrobiotic farmers and the future-oriented strategies of schools or banks. A number of writers are collecting success stories, with an eye toward making them generally accessible. Our task is merely to get to grips with them, choose where we want to begin and to enrich the future with our own abilities.

In so doing we can follow a very simple rule. For every decision we only need to ask ourselves one question: Am I realizing a piece of our common future, or am I taking a step back into our expansive past? Even smallest step in the right direction not only changes a bit of the world. It also expands our consciousness and gives us new ways of perceiving our time.

Berlin journalists Ute Scheub and Annette Jensen, for example, say that the research they did for their book *The Economy of Happiness: Those Who Share Enjoy More of Life* changed them as

people. Normally journalists must maintain distance toward what they report about and not get carried away by their emotions. But the two authors said that this was not possible when writing their book. Scheub and Jensen describe meeting independent-minded and strong-willed people, who pursued alternative lifestyle with such spirit, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that their enthusiasm was contagious.

Thus hope also entails getting enthusiastic about the future that is already here and learning for the first time to really enjoy the present in the process.

We human beings are part of creation on this planet, part of its capacity for change. But we can only sense this if we no longer allow ourselves to be robbed of our time on the planet. Why not start right now? That is hope put into action.