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An Intimate History of Humanity

Theodore Zeldin

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About the Book

This extraordinarily wide-ranging study looks at the dilemmas of life today and shows how they need not have arisen. Portraits of living people and historical figures are placed alongside each other as Zeldin discusses how men and women have lost and regained hope; how they have learnt to have interesting conversations; how some have acquired an immunity to loneliness; how new forms of love and desire have been invented; how respect has become more valued than power; how the art of escaping from one’s troubles has developed; why even the privileged are often gloomy; and why parents and children are changing their minds about what they want from each other.

About the Author

Theodore Zeldin, educated at Birkbeck College London and Christ Church Oxford, is senior fellow of St Antony's College Oxford. He has been awarded the Wolfson Prize for History, been elected a member of the European Academy, and figures on the *Magazine Littéraire's* list of the hundred most important thinkers in the world today.

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An Intimate History of Humanity

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VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Preface

Our imaginations are inhabited by ghosts. Here are the results of my investigations of the familiar ghosts which reassure, the lazy ones which make us obstinate and, above all, the frightening ones which discourage. The past haunts us, but from time to time people have changed their minds about the past. I want to show how, today, it is possible for individuals to form a fresh view both of their own personal history and of humanity's whole record of cruelty, misunderstanding and joy. To have a new vision of the future, it has always first been necessary to have a new vision of the past.

Each of my chapters begins with the portrait of a living person who has desires and regrets in which you may perhaps recognise something of yourself, but who is also restrained by attitudes inherited from origins long forgotten. The mind is a refuge for ideas dating from many different centuries, just as the cells of the body are of different ages, renewing themselves or decaying at varying speeds. Instead of explaining the peculiarity of individuals by pointing to their family or childhood, I take a longer view: I show how they pay attention to – or ignore – the experience of previous, more distant generations, and how they are continuing the struggles of many other communities all over the world, whether active or extinct, from the Aztecs and the Babylonians to the Yoruba and the Zoroastrians, among whom they have more soul-mates than they may realise.

You will not find history laid out in these pages as it is in museums, with each empire and each period carefully separated. I am writing about what will not lie still, about

the past which is alive in people’s minds today. However, before I explain what I want to do with these ghosts, I should like to introduce you to a few of them.

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How humans have repeatedly lost hope, and how new encounters, and a new pair of spectacles, revive them

‘MY LIFE IS a failure.’ That is Juliette’s verdict on herself, though she very rarely makes it public. Could her life have been different? Yes, just as the history of humanity could have been different.

She carries herself with dignity, observing all that happens around her, but keeping her reactions to herself. Only in brief moments, hesitatingly, will she reveal a little of what she thinks, which she does in whispers, as though truth is too brittle to be brought out of its wrappings. A glint in her eye says: You may think I am stupid, but I know I am not.

Juliette is fifty-one, and has been a domestic servant since the age of sixteen. She has so mastered the art of looking after a house, preparing and serving meals, that all overburdened mothers who catch a glimpse of her, and who can afford to, have the same thought: how can they persuade this paragon to work for them? Has she a few hours to spare? But though an ideal family help, she has been unable to cope with her own family. At work she is wholly reliable, taking endless care with every detail; but in her own home those qualities have never been sufficient.

Her mother was also a domestic servant. ‘I have nothing to complain of,’ says Juliette. ‘She brought us up very well,

even if she did spank us.’ Widowed when Juliette was only seven, she went to work early and returned late: ‘We didn’t see her much.’ So Juliette fooled around rather than doing her lessons: ‘I didn’t see the point of school.’ She met no ally who cared for her specially, no mentor from outside her small world to help her, and she left with no paper qualifications, no entry ticket to anywhere.

At the age of sixteen, ‘I did something stupid.’ So she married the father of her baby and had eight more children. Babies were pure joy to her; she loves to hug them; but only so long as they are babies. Once they grow up, ‘They become difficult.’ Her husband was a handsome carpenter doing his military service, and at first he was nice to her: ‘I was truly in love.’ But very soon things went wrong. When her first daughter was six months old, she discovered from her neighbours that he had a mistress. From then on there was no trust between them. He went out a lot, to visit the mistress, she always suspected; then he took to drink, working less and less, saying work was too tiring. He began beating her: ‘I have scars all over my body.’ But she told nobody, she was so ashamed. ‘When I saw him coming home through the garden, I was terrified.’ Why did she not leave him? ‘I was too frightened. I was alone in his home town, where I knew nobody; I was cut off from my family after my marriage; I didn’t see my sisters for fourteen years; he stopped me going out, and it was the children who did the shopping. He stopped me going even to my brother’s funeral. I had no women friends any more. I went out only to work.’ And that, of course, meant she could not look after the children, who were farmed out to foster parents by the social services. The humiliation has left Juliette very sensitive. When people want to insult her, they say: ‘You couldn’t even bring up your own children.’ She protests, ‘People shouldn’t say things like that without knowing the facts.’

‘I started hitting my husband back in the end; I should have done so earlier.’ It was a long time before she managed to leave him. He died one month after the divorce: ‘I wasn’t sad; indeed, I laughed. I laugh now, but when we were together, I didn’t laugh.’ Ever since, she has worked with one purpose only: ‘My aim in life was to own my own home.’ And recently she paid off the mortgage on her flat. It is the foundation of her pride, making her a stronger person. But she is too frightened to live alone, though she has tried to do so. Now she has a man with her: ‘It’s for security, not to be totally alone at night.’ Sometimes she would prefer to have no one at all, and she is adamant that she does not want to marry this man. ‘In that I’m like a young girl of today, for whom marriage is no longer essential.’ They get on because he is also a divorcee and ‘wants peace’. He does the cooking, and she does the shopping: she loves touring the markets on Sundays, just looking, and enjoying the feel of new cloth, which is like a dream unsullied by reality. Having her own money to spend gives her a great sense of freedom. He has bought his own country cottage, because she has made it clear to him that if they quarrel he will have to move out: she constantly reminds him that the flat is hers, and says defiantly, ‘I can go out when I like, I can go and see a friend when I like.’

They do not speak much. When she gets home in the evening, her pleasure is to rest, to lie alone on her bed in the dark. Never reading a book, and hardly ever watching television, she prefers instead to think, with the lights out, about her past life: her mother, her husband, her children, and the terror of unemployment. ‘If a time came when there was no work for the children, that wouldn’t be pretty.’ She is sad that their life will not be better than her own: ‘It isn’t fair.’ Her explanation is that there are too many foreigners in France, who take the work and the housing, which means ‘the poor French have nothing. I don’t want to criticise Arabs or blacks, but I think it’s unfair. It’s because of them that my

children’s life is hard.’ One daughter works in a factory, another at the prefecture of police, a third is a domestic servant, as though this family is condemned to the worst-paid jobs for all eternity.

And what does Juliette think about at work? ‘Why, nothing. At work I don’t think, or I think about my saucepans.’ Work is relaxation from home. For though she has organised her home life so that she can have peace, people are prickly porcupines to Juliette, and getting on with them involves constant vigilance. Though she feels less fragile now, she is still very easily hurt by what others say about her. She prefers to work alone, as an independent cleaning woman, because she fears the gossip of offices and factories: ‘People repeat things about you, twisting your words, and sometimes that can cost you dearly.’ There is nothing she hates more than to be criticised; every hint of disapproval is a bruise upon a bruise. Keeping her head high is a constant effort, and dignity requires that she should not complain. She never told her sisters how her husband treated her. When she visits them now, she is careful not to say what she thinks of their way of managing their lives; and they never speak to her about her past: ‘They know they would make me really angry.’ For example, her younger sister, whose husband is dead and who now lives with a man with whom she is not really happy, often says to him, ‘Pack your bags and clear out.’ Juliette is careful not to interfere in their quarrels. ‘It’s her problem.’ And if, despite herself, she does spill a tiny drop of criticism, the sister replies, ‘Mind your own onions.’ All her sisters, she says, are as careful as she is: they do not show their anger.

‘In families with children, there are always quarrels.’ Of her own children, perhaps the one who is doing best is the eldest, whose husband is also dead and who lives with a man who obeys her: ‘She’s the boss, and he’s an idiot, because she’s too hard on him.’ But she adds, ‘I don’t take

any interest in the private lives of my children. If they quarrel in front of me, I won't interfere.'

The most irritating person in Juliette's world, like a mosquito that bites and will not go away, is her man's daughter, aged seventeen, who lives in a hostel because her mother is separated after a second failed marriage. Juliette, for all her wisdom, is a classic stepmother. 'You can't come here for Mother's Day because you're not my daughter. You can come for Father's Day.' This girl, she is convinced, is 'really wicked': she has learnt about Juliette's troubles and is always saying, 'You're a failure.' Juliette becomes furious. 'If she was my daughter, I'd give her a spanking': the girl is spoilt, badly brought up, does not help with the housework: the new generation have it too easy. The girl replies that she will complain to the judge: 'You'll go to prison,' and Juliette is frightened of being involved with the law. Her man does not interfere in these disputes: 'He wants peace.' So when the arguing becomes unbearable, 'I go out for a walk with my cheque book.' It is like a passport that proves that Juliette is an independent woman. She feels she is making progress in the art of being independent by the way she uses it. Only a few years ago, she would recover from an insult by spending wildly: 'I didn't think twice before buying, I didn't compare prices. But now I am more stable. It's my friend who has probably influenced me in this. He's careful; he has made me more balanced. I used to be more nervous than I am.' The consumer society is a giant tranquilliser for raw nerves.

When Juliette was young, she worked thirteen hours a day; fewer now, but she still earns less than most people. It would be possible to find better-paid work, but she likes employers whom she can cope with and understand, who do not disturb her with criticism. To ensure a proper balance, she works for several, distributing her hours like someone on a diet. 'It would be impossible if I had an employer who shouted at me all day, and then I had to go home to a man

who shouted at me all evening.' One of the women she cleans for does indeed shout, but 'has a good heart'. Another is the granddaughter of a former president of the French Republic, who lies on a sofa all day doing nothing, suffering from various ailments: 'If she was not so sorry for herself, she could do something with her life'; but her kindness is perfect. A third has problems with his children and with his health: 'Take care of yourself, I say. Yes, doctor, he replies.' A fourth is a doctor, who shows no interest in her when she is ill, in contrast to her fifth client, who is all attention the moment she utters a little cough: she remembers it as a high point in her life that he allowed her to go home an hour early once, saying, 'It is not the factory here.'

Some of these employers, at least, she considers to be her 'friends'. To one of them she said, 'Whatever happens, I won't desert you. I wouldn't allow myself to leave you. I couldn't find anyone as kind.' She has worked for the doctor for twenty-four years, despite his limitations, 'because I know his character. I know how to deal with him. I say nothing when I see he is in a bad temper.' The low points come when they complain about her work. 'The mistress of a house must not insult an employee in front of guests: she should go to the kitchen to do it. Otherwise it's vulgar.' Once at a dinner party Juliette forgot to place the potatoes around the meat, putting them by mistake on a separate plate. Her mistress called her a stupid cow. She burst into tears and said she would leave. 'The doctor apologised, but his wife would not.' Juliette stayed. At another house, she was called skivvy. 'I will not tolerate being called that.' But then anger subsides: 'One must adapt oneself to everyone. Every employer presents problems. There are some who understand the life of a *femme de ménage*, but some do not.' And she consoles herself: 'These people rely on me. I become more cultured with them: they tell me things. One of them – he's an educated man – tells me all about his

problems, but he says, “Don’t tell anyone.” So it’s between him and me.’

Perhaps Juliette’s life could have been different if the meetings which have decided its course had been less silent, superficial or routine, if more thoughts had been exchanged, if humanity had been more able to show itself in them. But they were restrained by the ghosts which continue to influence what employers and strangers and even people who live together may or may not say to each other. Juliette insists that ‘given my abilities’ she could have had a better job, that working for old people would have appealed to her, and that it was her lack of paper qualifications that obstructed her. It was even more tragic that none of the influential people she worked for believed it was in their interest to help her start a more satisfying career. Her conclusion is, ‘My life is finished.’

There are currently several different ways of interpreting this story. One can say: that is what life is like, and there are many reasons why it is so. Or one can hope that if the knots into which humanity ties itself could be untied, and its crazy institutions made more sensible, then life could be changed, and poverty could be abolished, but it may take decades, perhaps even centuries. Or one can hate life for being so cruel and try to bear it by making fun of it, or parodying it, or delighting in minute descriptions of it, all the while protecting oneself against disappointment by refusing to suggest solutions to problems, and by condemning all such efforts as naive.

My purpose is different. Behind Juliette’s misfortunes, I see all those who have lived but thought of themselves as failures, or been treated as such. The worst sense of failure was to realise that one had not really lived at all, not been seen as an independent human being, never been listened to, never been asked for an opinion, regarded as a chattel, the property of another. That was what happened publicly to

slaves. We are all of us descended from slaves, or almost slaves. All our autobiographies, if they went back far enough, would begin by explaining how our ancestors came to be more or less enslaved, and to what degree we have become free of this inheritance. Legally, of course, slavery has been abolished (not all that long ago: Saudi Arabia was the last country to end it in 1962), but slavery also has a metaphorical, broader meaning: it is possible to be a slave of the passions, or of one's work, or of one's habits, or of the spouse one cannot for various reasons leave. The world is still full of people who, though they have no recognised slave masters, see themselves as having little freedom, as being at the mercy of uncontrollable, anonymous economic and social forces, or of their circumstances, or of their own stupidity, and whose personal ambitions are permanently blunted thereby. The modern descendant of a slave has even less hope than a sinner, who can repent; the impotent, trapped human being can see no comparable instant cure. Juliette is not a slave: nobody owns her. She is not a serf: nobody has a right to her labour. But to think one's life is finished, or that it is a failure, is to suffer from the same sort of despair which afflicted people in the days when the world believed it could not do without slaves. It is therefore important to understand what legal slavery meant.

Humans became slaves in the past for three main reasons. The first was fear: they did not want to die, however much suffering life caused. They agreed to be despised by kings and knights and other addicts of violence, who believed that death in battle was the highest honour, and for whom to enslave humans, and to domesticate animals, was part of the same search for power and comfort. But slaves also put up with being treated like animals, bought and sold, heads shaven, branded, beaten, called by contemptuous names (Monkey, Downcast, Strumpet, Irritation), because oppression seemed to be an inescapable ingredient of life for most people. In Han China,

the word ‘slave’ derived from the word ‘child’, or ‘wife and child’. Similar unquestioning obedience was also imposed on the majority of humanity in most parts of the world, whether officially slave or not.

Before twelve million Africans were kidnapped to be slaves in the New World, the main victims were the Slavs, who gave their name to slavery. Hunted by Romans, Christians, Muslims, Vikings and Tatars, they were exported all over the world. Slav came to mean foreigner; most religions taught that it was acceptable to enslave foreigners; British children who were exported as slaves – the girls fattened up to fetch a higher price – ended up as Slavs. More recently, when Slavs found themselves ruled by tyrants and saw no hope of escaping, some gloomily concluded that there must be something in the character of Slavs which dooms them to being enslaved. This is false reasoning, pretending that what has happened had to happen. No free person can believe that: it is a reasoning imposed on slaves to make them despair.

Fear has nearly always been more powerful than the desire for freedom: humans are not born free. However, the Emperor Maurice of Byzantium (582–602) discovered an exception. He was amazed by three Slavs he captured, who carried no arms. All they had with them were guitars or zithers, and they wandered around singing about the joys of liberty, of being in the open fields and the fresh breezes. They told him, ‘It is normal for people who are strangers to war to devote themselves with fervour to music.’ Their songs were about free will, and they were known as the freewill people. In 1700 there were still such people, when Peter the Great decreed that there should be no more of them: everyone must be part of a legal estate, with fixed duties. But 150 years later Tara Sevcenko, a liberated Ukrainian serf, was singing poems in the same tradition, lamenting that ‘liberty has been put to sleep by the drunken Tsar’, insisting that hope could be found in nature:

Listen to what the sea says,
Ask the black mountains.

There was slavery, first of all, because those who wished to be left alone could not keep out of the way of those who enjoyed violence. The violent have been victorious for most of history because they kindled the fear with which everyone is born.

Secondly, humans became slaves ‘voluntarily’. In Aztec Mexico, the majority of slaves chose, if that is the word, to be so, overcome by depression, wanting to be rid of their responsibilities – retired players of patolli, the national ball game, for example, ruined by their addiction to the sport, or women tired of love and preferring to be sure of having something to eat: the basis of the slave contract was that a slave had to be fed, and if he was not, he had to be freed. The Muscovites, when they learnt to resist their predators, and began to enslave each other instead, developed eight different forms of slavery, of which by far the most common was the ‘voluntary’ one. Their frontier society was established without institutions of charity. The hungry sold themselves as slaves. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, about one-tenth of Muscovites became slaves, so that there were more slaves than there were townspeople, or soldiers, or priests. An American historian has compared these slaves to the American poor living on welfare.

Slavery in Russia was a kind of pawnshop for people who had nothing but themselves to sell; one-third of slaves were normally absconders on the run, but usually they came back, worn out by freedom, unable to cast off the prisoner’s mentality: ‘Not every slave dreams of freedom. After a few years of being totally dominated, an independent existence in harsh reality became almost unthinkable,’ says their historian Hellie. In America escape was harder: the southern states of the USA probably had one of the harshest slave systems in the world, because slaves were employed

intensively to make high profits from agriculture, whereas in Russia and China they were used mainly as domestics. But whatever the precise conditions of treatment, the fact that there were so many kinds of slaves, and that each individual could be subject to slightly different forms of abuse, meant that each could consider he had some privileges, that he was not the lowest of the low; envy blinded him to the common suffering; on American plantations, it was possible to find African slaves to whip other African slaves. In other words, once an institution is set up, even those who suffer from it find ways, however slight, of exploiting it, and willy-nilly they help it to survive.

The third kind of slave was the ancestor of today's ambitious executive and bureaucrat. Owning slaves gave prestige; being a slave meant working. Free men considered it beneath them to work for another; Roman aristocrats refused to be bureaucrats for the emperor. So he started a civil service using slaves, and the aristocrats employed slaves to manage their estates. Slaves had no family, no loyalty to anybody but their master. They made the most reliable officials, soldiers, private secretaries. The Ottoman and Chinese empires were often managed by slaves, sometimes by eunuch slaves, who rose to the highest posts and indeed sometimes ended as grand viziers and emperors; castration made sure that they placed loyalty to the state before family. There are no statistics to say how many people are morally castrated by their employers today.

The Russian word for work – *rabota* – comes from the word slave, *rab*. The origin of the leisure society is the dream of living like a master, with the work done by robots, mechanical slaves. The sting in the tail of this history of slavery is that once free, people often become robots, at least in part of their lives. There has been a great reluctance to abandon all forms of slavish behaviour. 'The height of misery is to depend on another's will,' said Publilius, a

Syrian slave who became a popular entertainer and mime in ancient Rome. And yet the fantasies of romantic love are based on dependence. The freed slave often preferred to remain dependent, continuing in the same work; the stain of slavery took several generations to fade. In China and Africa the freed slave often became a sort of poor relation; in Europe a client. To live outside the protection of someone more powerful than oneself was too frightening an adventure.

The quality which was most remarkable about slaves – or at least those who did not get permanently drunk to forget their sorrow – was dignity. Many of them succeeded in asserting their autonomy even while being forced into menial work, pretending to accept their humiliations, playing a role, so that the master could live under the illusion that he was in charge, while they knew that he depended on them. 'Play fool, to catch wise,' was the favourite proverb of the Jamaican slave. And occasionally a slave owner did realise that he was not only being fooled but that he was a slave too: 'We use other people's feet when we go out, we use other people's eyes to recognise things, we use another person's memory to greet people, we use someone else's help to stay alive – the only things we keep for ourselves are our pleasures,' wrote Pliny the Elder in AD 77. This Roman slave owner, the author of an enormous Natural History, died as a result of getting too close to Mount Vesuvius, whose eruption he wanted to witness: he knew he was a parasite, because observing nature is a good way to learn how to recognise parasites.

The solution for slavery was not its abolition, at least that was not a total solution, because new forms of slavery were invented under another name. The factory workers who toiled in poisonous air from sunrise till sunset and never saw daylight except on Sundays, obeying in silence, probably led even worse lives than many ancient slaves. And today, all

those who prefer to do what they are told rather than think for themselves and shoulder the responsibility – one-third of Britons, according to a poll, say that is what they prefer – are the spiritual heirs of the voluntary slaves of Russia. It is important to remember that it is tiring, and trying, being free; and in times of exhaustion affection for freedom has always waned, whatever lip-service might be paid to it.

The conclusion I draw from the history of slavery is that freedom is not just a matter of rights, to be enshrined in law. The right to express yourself still leaves you with the need to decide what to say, to find someone to listen, and to make your words sound beautiful; these are skills which need to be acquired. All that the law says to you is that you can play your guitar, if you can get hold of one. So declarations of human rights provide only a few of the ingredients out of which freedom is made.

Just as important have been encounters with others, with people or with places, which have provided the inspiration and courage to escape from dull routines. There has been a waste of an opportunity every time a meeting has taken place and nothing has happened, as when it did not even occur to any of Juliette's employers to help her into the career she dreamed about. In most meetings, pride or caution still forbids one to say what one feels most deeply. The noise of the world is made out of silences.

So rather than begin by summarising ancient Greek philosophy, as is usual whenever freedom is mentioned, I prefer to use a single example of a person assembling the right mix of people and conditions, though it took him half a lifetime to do so. Domenicos Theotocopoulos, surnamed El Greco (1541–1614), would doubtless have remained an obscure artist of no significance, repetitively painting conventional icons, imprisoned by formalities and habits, had he not formed links with others and learned how to draw out the humanity from those who seemed to have none. Having absorbed all he could from the assorted

traditions of his native Crete – ruled by Venetians, divided by Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, anchored to the past by refugees perpetuating the dying art of Byzantium – he added new dimensions to his heritage by travelling abroad. In Italy, he met a minor Croatian painter called Julio Glovio, known as ‘the Macedonian’, through whose introduction he became a pupil of Titian. He could then easily have put himself back in shackles as a pseudo-Italian minor portraitist doing what was asked of him; but he aspired to more than imitation. So at the age of thirty-five he settled in Toledo. Asked why, he replied, ‘I am not obliged to answer that question.’ It was dangerous to say publicly that here he felt free, that here there were no rivals to haunt him, that his ambition to paint – as he put it – ‘more honestly and decently’ than Michelangelo could only be achieved in a frontier city. Toledo reverberated with excitement because it knew what both toleration and persecution meant; Christians, Muslims and Jews had once lived in it side by side; one of its kings had been proud to call himself Emperor of the Three Religions and another to have his epitaph inscribed on his tombstone in Castilian, Arabic and Hebrew; and yet El Greco witnessed over a thousand supposed heretics being brought to trial before the local Inquisition. Here, living in the old Jewish quarter, both solitary and sociable, surrounded both by the spiritual fervour of the Counter-Reformation and by philosophising friends, he was stimulated to try to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable, to paint the divine and the human intertwined, to have the courage to put his colours directly on canvas without preliminary drawing, as though character was too fluid to have hard boundaries. He saw painting as part of the pursuit of knowledge and the understanding of the individual.

It took a long time for Spaniards to recognise him as one of their own: the 1910 catalogue of the Prado Museum still listed him as a member of the ‘Italian School’. It takes a long time for people to recognise their soul-mates when they

have too limited an idea of who they are themselves. It took Spaniards a long time to realise that their contribution to the history of the harmonisation of incompatibilities was more important than their contribution to the history of pride, or to appreciate Alonso de Castrillo's saying in 1512 that eventually people grow 'weary of obedience' (just as people may eventually grow weary of freedom if they do not know what to do with it).

Today, the whole of humanity can see something of itself in the paintings of El Greco, who died owning only one spare suit, two shirts and a beloved library of books on every subject. Because of him, everybody can feel, to a certain extent, a citizen of Toledo. He is an example of a person who discovers what humans have in common. I shall go deeper into this question of how links are formed, or revealed, between apparently isolated individuals, even across the centuries; but before I do so, I shall say a little more about my method and my purpose.

What we make of other people, and what we see in the mirror when we look at ourselves, depends on what we know of the world, what we believe to be possible, what memories we have, and whether our loyalties are to the past, the present or the future. Nothing influences our ability to cope with the difficulties of existence so much as the context in which we view them; the more contexts we can choose between, the less do the difficulties appear to be inevitable and insurmountable. The fact that the world has become fuller than ever of complexity of every kind may suggest at first that it is harder to find a way out of our dilemmas, but in reality the more complexities, the more crevices there are through which we can crawl. I am searching for the gaps people have not spotted, for the clues they have missed.

I start with the present and work backwards, just as I start with the personal and move to the universal. Whenever I

have come across an impasse in present-day ambitions, as revealed in the case studies of people I have met, I have sought a way out by placing them against the background of all human experience in all centuries, asking how they might have behaved if, instead of relying only on their own memories, they had been able to use those of the whole of humanity.

The world's memories are normally stored in such a way that it is not easy to use them. Each civilisation, each religion, each nation, each family, each profession, each sex and each class has its own history. Humans have so far been interested mainly in their own private roots, and have therefore never claimed the whole of the inheritance into which they are born, the legacy of everybody's past experience. Each generation searches only for what it thinks it lacks, and recognises only what it knows already. I want to make a start on summarising that legacy, not by going chronologically through the deeds of the dead, but in such a way that individuals can make use of those parts of their legacy which affect what they care about most.

When, in the past, people have not known what they wanted, when they have lost their sense of direction, and everything appeared to be falling apart, they have generally found relief by changing the focus of their vision, switching their attention. What once seemed all-important is suddenly hardly noticed any more. Political ideals thus collapse abruptly and are replaced by personal concerns, materialism succeeds idealism, and from time to time religion returns. I want to show how priorities are changing today, and what sort of spectacles are needed to observe them. In the course of history, humans have repeatedly changed the spectacles through which they have looked at the world and themselves.

In 1662 the beginning of a major shift in attention was marked by the establishment of the Royal Society of London. It was needed, said its founders, because people

did not know what to look for or how. These scientists, and their successors, opened up huge territories for exploration, making the world look quite different. But scientific discovery is a specialist activity; most people can only watch in awe, and it does not help them to decide how to lead their daily lives.

In the nineteenth century, shifts in attention became more frequent and so more confusing. Alexis de Tocqueville's journey to the USA in 1831 was inspired by the conviction that America could provide a glimpse into the future, and that one could discover there what amazing things could be done with liberty; reforming political institutions to make them more democratic became the goal of almost everyone engaged in the pursuit of happiness; but Tocqueville came back with warnings about the looming tyranny of majorities and there is still no place where minorities are wholly satisfied. In the same year, Darwin's journey into the animal kingdom, which humans till then believed to exist for their benefit, switched attention to the struggle for life, which was increasingly seen as dominating every aspect of existence. But Darwin himself complained that his doctrines made him feel 'like a man who has become colour-blind', who has lost 'the higher aesthetic tastes', and that his mind had become 'a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts', causing a 'loss of happiness' and an 'enfeebling [of] the emotional part of our nature'. Marx's journey into the sufferings of the working class, and his invitation to revolution, tore the world apart for a hundred years, though it soon became obvious that revolutions are incapable of keeping their promises, however honestly made. Then, in the last years of the century, Freud embarked on a journey into the unconscious of the neurotics of Vienna, which changed what people saw inside themselves, what they worried about, and whom they blamed, but the hope that they would forgive once they understood has not been realised.

All these thinkers put the idea of conflict at the centre of their vision. The world continues to be haunted by that idea. Even those who want to abolish conflict use its methods to fight it.

However, the originality of our time is that attention is turning away from conflict to information. The new ambition is to prevent disasters, illnesses and crimes before they occur and to treat the globe as a single whole; women's entry into the public sphere is reinforcing the challenge to the tradition that conquest is the supreme goal of existence; more attention is being given to understanding other people's emotions than to making and unmaking institutions.

Yet much of what people do, despite these new yearnings, is governed by old ways of thinking. Both politics and economics have been powerless in the face of the obstinacy of entrenched mentalities. Mentalities cannot be changed by decree, because they are based on memories, which are almost impossible to kill. But it is possible to expand one's memories by expanding one's horizons, and when that happens, there is less chance that one will go on playing the same old tunes for ever and repeating the same mistakes.

Five hundred years ago, Europe underwent a Renaissance, as a result of four new encounters, imbibing four new stimulants, expanding its horizons. First, it revived forgotten memories of freedom and beauty. But it limited itself to the Greeks and the Romans. In this book, I have tried to open up the memories of the whole of humanity, and to use them to place the dilemmas of the present in a perspective which is not dominated by the idea of perpetual conflict. Secondly, in the Renaissance, Europe and America were betrothed, with the help of new technology; but it was more a geographical discovery of a continent than a discovery by humans of each other as persons; there is still silence and deafness among the inhabitants of the globe, though the technology exists to enable them to speak to anybody anywhere. I have

investigated why ears remained blocked and how they can be unblocked. The Renaissance, thirdly, was based on a new idea of the importance of the individual. But this was a fragile foundation, because individuals depended on constant applause and admiration to sustain them. There is a shortage of applause in the world, and there is not enough respect to go round. I have searched for methods of increasing the supply. Finally, the Renaissance involved a new idea of what religion should mean. The ultimate purpose of all religions is to draw people together, but so far they have also separated them. Their history is unfinished. I have searched beyond their disagreements for the spiritual values that they share, not only among themselves, but with unbelievers too.

Enough is known, enough has been written, about what divides people; my purpose is to investigate what they have in common. So I have focused particularly on how they meet. The search for new and old types of relationships, both close and distant, has, in my view, been the most important human preoccupation throughout history, though it has been disguised under many names, taking many different paths. Meeting God has been the supreme aim for all those to whom the soul is a divine spark. Enchantment with a hero or guru has been at the heart of growing up. Personal life has been increasingly dominated by the hunt for the ‘other half’. Parents have striven, more and more, to be on the same wavelength as their children. A good part of culture has been the process by which artists have been recognised as expressing the feelings of people they have never met. Most thoughts have been flirtations with the thoughts of others, dead or alive. Money and power, however obsessive, have ultimately been a means to a more intimate purpose. I investigate how humanity has become confused about its purpose, and how it is possible to acquire a new sense of direction.

When individuals have looked beyond their familiar surroundings, when they have learned to read and travel, they have discovered that many strangers share their emotions and interests. But fruitful contact between them has been rare. Very few of those who could be mutually sympathetic or stimulating, or who could join together in adventures which they could not undertake alone, have yet met. Now that for the first time better communication has become one of humanity's main priorities, no life can be considered to be fully lived if it has not benefited from all the encounters of which it is capable. Today, hope is sustained above all by the prospect of meeting new people.

All scientific discovery, indeed, is inspired by a similar search, and the meeting of ideas which have never come together before. So too is the art of making life meaningful and beautiful, which involves finding connections between what seems to have no connection, linking people and places, desires and memories, through details whose implications have gone unnoticed. The search for a soul-mate who matches one perfectly occupies only one part of intimate life; individuals are becoming increasingly many-sided; so it is about soul-mates of a less total kind that I write, who have some elements of character or attitude which can combine with elements in another to produce more than either could alone. Just as the science of materials has invented many new comforts by discovering how the same molecules are to be found in objects that are apparently totally different, how these molecules can be rearranged, how seemingly incompatible ones can become receptive to one another, and united by gentle, multiple liaisons, so discovering unrecognised affinities between humans holds out the prospect of reconciliations and adventures which have so far seemed impossible. But merely to wait for mutual recognition is inadequate. The dream which cosmopolitans had, that antagonisms would evaporate naturally, was too simple, and ceased to be

credible because it underestimated how different and vulnerable every person – and every group – is. I have investigated how relationships of varying closeness may be established across frontiers without abandoning one's loyalties or uniqueness.

It may seem sheer temerity even to conceive of the possibility of another renaissance, but hope has always emerged from its hibernation, however battered, however long it takes to wake up. Of course, it cannot return with its faith in utopias, for they have caused too many catastrophes. To find a new sense of direction, it will need to incorporate the certainty of failure, to a lesser or greater extent; but if failure is expected, and studied, it need not destroy courage.

Instead of packing my information into conventional categories, which would only confirm that the habitual economic, political and social factors weigh heavily on all that humans do, I have rearranged it, finding new points of contact between the ordinary and the exotic, between the past and the present, so as to be able to address the questions which matter most to the present generation.

I have dealt with only a limited range of people, places and topics, because I am trying to suggest a method and an approach, not to fit all facts into pigeon-holes, and because even several lifetimes would not have been sufficient to remedy my ignorance, or to cope with all the information that is available. What to do with too much information is the great riddle of our time. My solution is to look at the facts through two lenses simultaneously, both through a microscope, choosing details that illuminate life in those aspects that touch people most closely, and through a telescope, surveying large problems from a great distance. I hope I say enough to show that humans have many more options before them than they currently believe.

The gallery of portraits I place at the heart of my book are of individuals and not a statistically representative sample: