

The Wisdom *Map*

Understanding Yourself, Love, and the Life You're Living

SELF · LOVE · MEANING



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Wisdom Women Library

The Wisdom Map: Understanding Yourself, Love, and the Life You're Living

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Nora, Diane, Teresa and Lena, and the other people in their stories, are composites drawn from many lives. Any resemblance to a particular person is coincidental.

This book is for reflection and education. It is not a substitute for medical, psychological, legal or financial advice. If you are in a relationship where speaking up isn't safe, please reach out to someone you trust or a local support service.

Cover and interior images were created for this book.

AN INTRODUCTION

Before We *Begin*

It is Sunday evening, and Nora is reading the email for the third time. The promotion is hers if she wants it. Vice president. The title she wrote in a notebook eleven years ago, the year she decided she was done being the smartest person in the room whom nobody listened to. Her phone keeps lighting up. Her sister: *I knew it.* A colleague: *About time.* Her husband has already opened the good wine.

Everyone is certain. Nora is the only one who isn't, and she can't say why.

You may know a version of that evening. It doesn't have to be a promotion. It might be the quiet after the last child moves out, when the house is finally yours and you don't know what to do in it. It might be the third year of driving your father to every appointment while your siblings send their love. It might be a life you rebuilt after a marriage ended, a life that works, mostly, and still keeps you awake with a question you can't quite name.

Nothing is wrong, exactly. You could explain your life to anyone and it would make sense. That is part of the problem. A life can make perfect sense and still not be fully understood by the woman living it.

This book is about that gap.

What this book is, and what it isn't

It won't tell you to burn your life down and start over. It won't tell you to be grateful and stop asking questions. Both answers are too easy, and both skip the hard part: understanding what is actually going on before you decide what, if anything, should change.

What it offers instead is a set of distinctions. Eleven of them, one per chapter. Small differences that are easy to miss while you're busy living, and that can change a great deal once you see them.

The difference between a role you play and a rule about who you have to be.

Between being appreciated and being understood.

Between hoping someone will change and having evidence that they are.

Between a yes you chose and a yes you gave to keep the peace.

Between what it costs to change and what it costs to stay.

A distinction can change a decision. That is the whole idea of this book.

The distinctions come from many places: psychologists who have studied how we form identities and make choices, philosophers who asked what makes a life good, Carl Jung's language for the parts of ourselves we show and the parts we don't, and novelists who understood people better than most textbooks do. None of them can tell you what your life means. They can help you see it more clearly.

Why I wrote this book

One summer evening, around eight o'clock, I was sitting in my backyard in Tampa after a long day at work, winding down and thinking about the future.

Five years earlier, almost everything about my life had been different. I was married. I lived in Buffalo. I had run my own company since 2008. In the space of a few years I ended my marriage, sold the business, moved to Florida, networked my way into a director-level corporate role, and bought a house that I lived in alone.

That last part was the strangest. For months I had a knot in my stomach. I knew I could handle everything myself; I had been handling things my whole life. But for the first time, it was truly on me and nobody else. It felt like freedom and fear in the same breath. It took about

three years for my new life to feel normal. Today I can say something I couldn't have said at forty: I have my own back.

So that evening I asked myself a question I want you to hear too. What do I really want to do with the time I have? Not what should I do. Not what would impress anyone. What do I want?

For my first forty years, the honest answer would have been: prove myself. I don't regret those years. They served me well, and a lot of it was fun. But I had learned to measure my worth by my achievements and by what other people thought of me, and I had never once questioned it.

The ideas in this book are the ones that helped me question it, Carl Jung's above all. I spent years with his work, including time with a Jungian analyst. They are also the ideas I keep sharing with my women friends: the ones who don't like their jobs and don't know whether to leave, who feel stuck in a marriage or tired of waiting for the right partner, who feel strangely empty now that the kids are gone.

What I want for you is what I found for myself. You always have a choice. You and your circumstances are two different things; when your life changes, your worth doesn't. And the unknown isn't scary. It's just unknown.

Four women you'll come to know

You'll follow four women through these pages. Each is a composite, drawn from many real lives, and each is carrying a question she hasn't fully put into words.

Nora, 48, has just been offered the job she worked toward for a decade.

Diane, 54, has spent twenty-six years being the practical one. Her youngest left for college in August.

Teresa, 51, is her father's caregiver. Her sister lives two states away and sends money.

Lena, 46, is three years past a divorce, in a new relationship, and living in the house she fought to keep.

Their stories move forward as the book does. You'll watch each of them get something wrong, notice it, and see her situation differently. Whether she changes anything is up to her. The same is true for you.

Your map

Before you turn the page, do one thing.

Think of one situation in your life that feels unsettled right now. Not your whole life. One thing. A role you're tired of, a decision you keep postponing, a relationship you keep waiting on, a commitment you're no longer sure about.

Describe it in two sentences. Write it in the margin, in a notebook, or say it to yourself on a walk.

That is your live question. You'll carry it through the whole book.

At the end of each chapter there is a short Map page. It asks you to look at your live question through that chapter's distinction, with two or three plain questions and an example of what an answer can look like. By the last chapter you'll have eleven answers about the same situation, seen from eleven angles. Read in order, they are your map.

Three questions sit underneath every Map page. Keep them close:

What do I actually know? What happened, what was said, what this gives me and what it costs, as opposed to what I fear or hope.

What am I adding? The story, the rule, or the assumption I've laid on top.

What could I learn next? A conversation to have, a number to check, a small thing to try.

You don't have to write anything. You can answer in your head. But writing helps, because a thought on paper is harder to talk yourself out of.

A few honest notes before we start. The Map pages are not a test, and nothing here is a diagnosis. The research in these chapters de-

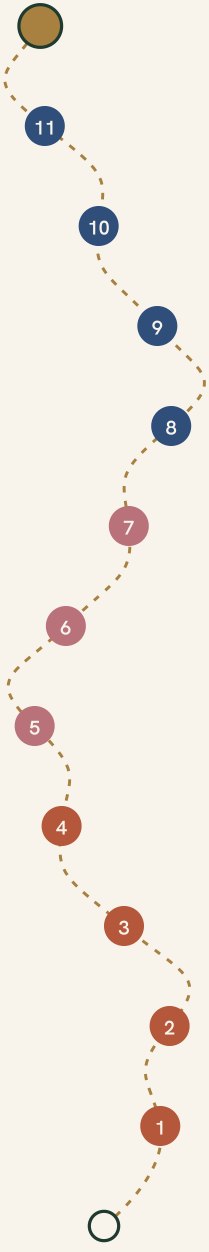
scribes patterns in groups of people, not your private motives. If you are in a relationship where speaking up isn't safe, your safety comes before any exercise in this book. And if you reach the end and your answer is that you want to keep your life exactly as it is, that is a real answer. You'll simply know why.

You may finish with more clarity than you started with. Sometimes a single distinction changes how you see a decision you've carried for years. What you do with that is yours.

Let's begin with Teresa, on a Saturday morning.

The Wisdom *Map*

One situation in your life, seen from eleven angles. Each chapter adds one line to your map.



YOUR MAP
What I see more clearly now

11 — A loss, a value, or a life I'm imagining

10 — The cost of staying, the cost of changing

9 — Happy, meaningful, rich

8 — The goal and its promise

7 — A yes I chose, or a yes to keep the peace

6 — Hope and evidence

5 — Appreciated, or understood?

4 — What I do, what I bring, what I'd miss

3 — What happened, and what I added

2 — The value under the plan

1 — A role, or a rule?

START HERE
Your live question

PART III · MEANING

PART II · LOVE

PART I · SELF

YOUR MAP · START HERE

Your live question

Think of one situation in your life that feels unsettled right now. Not your whole life. One thing: a role you're tired of, a decision you keep postponing, a relationship you keep waiting on, a commitment you're no longer sure about.

FOR EXAMPLE

Whether to keep hosting every family holiday. I've done it for nine years. I'm tired, and I'm afraid of what it would mean to stop.

1 *What is it, in a few words?*

2 *Describe it in two sentences. What makes it feel unsettled?*

This is your live question. Every Map page in this book comes back to it.



PART I

Self

How a role becomes who you are



CHAPTER ONE · PART I · SELF

The Woman Who Became Good at Being *Needed*

A role, or a rule?

The first call comes at 7:40 on Saturday morning. It's Teresa's father. The pharmacy switched his prescription to a generic, the pills are a different color, and he wants to know whether they're the right ones.

They are. She knew they would be. She checks anyway, because if she didn't and something went wrong, she would never forgive herself.

At 8:15 her sister Carla texts from two states away: *Can you send me Dad's insurance info? Trying to sort out the bill.* Teresa sends it, then sorts out the bill herself, because by the time she had explained it she could have done it. At 9:30 a colleague emails about Monday's meeting, a question that could easily wait until Monday. She answers it. At 10:00 her daughter calls to ask how long to roast a chicken.

By noon, four people are relieved. Teresa made their mornings easier, and she's good at it. Being capable feels good. Being trusted is a kind of love.

The pottery class she had signed up for started at 10:30. She noticed at about 11:15.

Nobody told her to skip it. Nobody asked her to choose. She simply knew what needed doing, and she did it.

The morning she got back

A few weeks later Teresa tries something new. She tells everyone, her father included, that she'll be unreachable on Saturday from ten to one. Carla says, "Of course, enjoy it." Her father says, "Go, go." Nobody objects.

She sits in the pottery studio with clay on her hands and checks her phone four times in the first hour.

Here is what's strange. Everyone gave her permission. The obligation had been lifted. And she still couldn't set it down.

That hour shows something a crowded calendar never would. Teresa's problem isn't only the number of things people ask of her. Somewhere along the way, being the one who handles things stopped being something she does and became part of who she is. You can't take a morning off from who you are.

So here is a question worth sitting with. If everyone in your life said, "Take the morning, we're fine," could you take it? Or would you find another task before you let yourself enjoy it? Your answer tells you where the first conversation needs to happen: with the people who rely on you, or with the rule you've been holding yourself to.

A job versus a rule

Try saying these two sentences out loud.

"I'm responsible for my father's medications."

"I'm the kind of person who never lets anyone down."

The first describes a job. It has edges. You can share it, hand part of it to a sister, change it when circumstances change, talk it over with someone. The second describes a rule about who you are. It has no edges. It follows you into every room and answers every text.

Most of us never decide to adopt the second sentence. It grows out of the first, one reasonable yes at a time. Having standards isn't the problem. The problem is a standard with no boundary, because it quietly becomes an unlimited claim on your time.

Notice what happens when a job turns into a rule. A small practical question ("Could Carla handle the bill this month?") becomes a question about your character ("What kind of daughter would I be if I let her?"). A responsibility you could negotiate becomes a moral test, and moral tests are very hard to fail on purpose.

How a strength becomes an expectation

Teresa didn't become the reliable one by accident. She was the oldest. When her mother got sick, someone had to keep the household running, and Teresa was fourteen and capable. She learned that noticing what needed doing, and doing it before anyone asked, kept things steady. People counted on her. Their confidence made her more confident. She got better and better at anticipating what others would need.

None of that is unhealthy. It may describe some of the best things about her. It may describe some of the best things about you.

But a strength repeated for nearly forty years becomes an expectation, and an expectation kept long enough becomes an identity. Sociologists who study identity, among them Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke, describe our roles as held in place from two directions at once: by other people's expectations of us, and by our own wish to stay recognizable to ourselves. Other people know you as the one who handles things. You know yourself that way too. Every time you handle something, the picture gets a little sharper, for everyone.

That explains something otherwise puzzling. You can sincerely want a change and still resist making it.

Nora sees this at work. She tells her team she wants them to take more initiative. Then, when someone approaches a problem differently from the way she would, she corrects them before they finish their sentence. The team learns that initiative is welcome as long as it arrives at Nora's answer. She stays overwhelmed, and she stays essential, and she can't quite see that the second is part of why she puts up with the first.

At home, Teresa's version is the bill. When Carla does try to handle something, she does it differently: slower, with three phone calls Teresa would have avoided. And Teresa steps back in. It's faster, she tells herself.

It may well be faster. But stepping back in also protects something: her place as the one who knows how. Sharing the work means sharing

the role, and the role is part of how she recognizes herself.

That's uncomfortable to see. It's also freeing, because now there is something to work with. "Everyone takes advantage of me" leaves you stuck. "I've been holding on to a role I also want to put down" gives you somewhere to start.

The mask that became a face

Carl Jung had a word for the face we show the world: the *persona*, from the Latin word for an actor's mask.

It's easy to hear "mask" and think "fake." That isn't what Jung meant. We need personas. A doctor has to be able to act as a doctor. A mother sometimes has to be steady when she is frightened. Social roles make it possible to work together, keep promises, and belong. They aren't lies.

The trouble Jung described begins when we identify with the role so completely that we forget we are wearing it. The way we meet the world starts to feel like the whole of who we are.

You can be dependable without being available for every request. You can love caring for your family without being the only one allowed to care for it. You can be generous without making every preference negotiable except your own. The capable woman isn't a fiction. The problem starts when her capability becomes the argument against letting her be anything else.

The bargain nobody remembers making

Every role pays something. The woman who organizes everything receives gratitude, influence, and a secure place in other people's lives. The woman who solves every problem rarely has to feel the exposure of needing help. The woman who never says no never has to find out whether her relationships would survive a no.

None of this makes her selfish or manipulative. Nobody signs this bargain on purpose. It builds up over thousands of ordinary mornings.

But because the role gives you something real, changing it takes more than announcing a boundary. It may mean putting up with someone's frustration. Watching someone do a task less well than you would. Finding out whether a relationship stays close when you stop performing your usual function. Finding satisfaction somewhere other than in being indispensable.

That is why "just say no" so often falls flat. It addresses the behavior and ignores what the behavior has come to mean.

The useful question isn't "Why do I do so much?" It's this: **What do I believe would happen, to my relationships or to the way I see myself, if I did less?**

Teresa's honest answer surprised her. She had assumed Carla would resent being asked to do more. Months later, when she finally asked, Carla would tell her she'd been waiting for years to be let in. What Teresa actually feared was something else entirely: that if her father didn't need her, she wouldn't know how to be his daughter.

A boundary can't solve that. But now she can see it, and you can't work on what you can't see.

What was asked, and what you assumed

There is one more distinction in this chapter, and it's a practical one: the difference between an expectation someone actually gave you and one you've learned to give yourself.

If your manager requires you to answer messages on weekends, that is a workplace expectation. It may call for a conversation, or a decision about the job. If nobody has asked, and you answer anyway because an unread message makes you uneasy, that's a different situation. The rule you're enforcing is your own.

Usually both are mixed together. And some responsibilities really aren't optional: a parent who can't manage alone, a job you can't afford to lose, a child who needs you. But almost every role contains three things: real necessities, real choices, and habits nobody has looked at in years. Knowing which is which is most of the work.

What this opens

The woman who first took on a role usually had good reasons. She needed stability, belonging, income, or a way to care for people she loved. Those reasons deserve respect.

You might not choose them today. And there's a second complication. Even when you can see that your reasons have changed, it's easy to assume that the woman who will live with your next decision, five or ten years from now, will want exactly what you want today.

She may not. That is where we go next.

A role, or a rule?

Look at the live question you wrote down at the start. Somewhere inside it is a role you play: the one who handles it, pays for it, organizes it, keeps the peace, or knows the answer.

FOR EXAMPLE

"I'm the one who plans every family holiday. My mother asked me to host Thanksgiving once, nine years ago. Nobody has asked since; I just do it. If I stopped, I'm afraid it would look like I don't care."

1 *What do people count on you for in this situation?*

2 *Which of those expectations has someone actually said out loud, and which have you assumed?*

3 *If you stepped back from one part of it, what are you afraid it would say about you?*

Keep your answer. You'll come back to it.



END OF THE FREE SAMPLE

Keep *reading*

Nora is about to open the old notebook in her desk drawer. Diane is still cooking for four in a quiet house. Lena is about to hear a colleague say five words that bother her for weeks. And Teresa's father is about to ask her for something big.

The full book has ten more chapters, ten more Map pages, and a closing chapter where all four women make their choices. By the end, your eleven answers become your map.

Get the full book at wisdomwomenlibrary.com

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