

# Yesterday Never Sleeps

How Integrating Life's Current and Past  
Connections Improves Our Well-Being

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The names and identifying characteristics of persons referenced in this book, as well as identifying events and places, have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals and their families.

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First Edition

*This book is dedicated to my children, Sarah and Joseph,  
and to my late parents, to whom none can compare.*



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# Introduction

In the opening scene of the Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane*, Charles Foster Kane is an old man lying in bed holding a snow globe, and we watch it slip from his hand and fall to the floor as Kane whispers the word “Rosebud” and dies. Throughout the movie, a journalist doing a story on Kane desperately searches for the meaning of Kane’s last word. The audience, however, knows that it was the name of a sled from his childhood. More than that, we know it represented a brief time of innocence, parental love, and joy abruptly stolen from him, which he failed to recapture for the rest of his life. This loss profoundly impacted the man Kane became, a significant cause of his relationship failures.

We cannot know another person if we do not know ourselves, which is essential for relationships—for connection, compassion, empathy, and growth. We need to figure out what makes us tick and what ticks us off, no matter the environment. I wrote this book in part to explain the importance of becoming self-aware. The process of introspection helps control triggered emotions and encourages more flexible and adaptive responses.

This book includes a personal narrative that I began when I was dealing with immense grief over the death of my mother. During this time of mourning, I found catharsis, solace, and some personal epiphanies in writing and telling stories about my family life.

The book also relates stories about people I have known and treated clinically in various settings over thirty years. I explain basic psychoanalytic theoretical principles to illustrate key concepts that are supremely important for understanding how to form secure, healthy relationships. Attachment-theory

research confirms that secure attachments are highly predictive of people who enjoy successful relationships, independence, a sense of purpose and direction, and overall well-being.

We all have our triggers, our “Rosebuds”; they are people, places, objects, ideas, memories, and dream fragments representing our undiscovered parts, the hidden hurts, and repressed longings often expressed in dysfunctional ways. They are the unconscious memories, often the most painful and the most deeply hidden; they are a stimulus that provokes an emotion and feeling—many times a day. And these triggers can harm us and our relationships when we’re unable to control our emotions but unwittingly allow those emotions to override our rational mind. Intense emotions like anxiety, especially in the young and developing brain, can disrupt thinking. We have to be able to pay attention to learn the simplest of things. But if we’re too anxious, we can’t concentrate. We can’t think straight. We need to find a way to regulate our emotions.

This is where self-awareness can help; it allows us to calm down enough so we can think mindfully. To gain self-awareness, we must become psychological sleuths and learn how to identify our emotions and patterns of dysfunctional responses before we act upon them. If we know ourselves well, we can regulate our emotions; this can set us on a path of self-discovery and help to loosen the grip of dysfunctional patterns of behavior.

Indeed, becoming a self-reflective, psychologically savvy person will enrich your life. You might argue that turning inward is a selfish and arrogant thing to do. But in fact, it’s the opposite. Relationships dominate our inner world, and we become more empathetic and compassionate when we look inward and examine ourselves. As a result, we recognize otherness—we acknowledge that other people are not extensions of ourselves—and we develop tolerance and respect for people with different points of view, experiences, and wisdom. We will be much less likely to blame those closest to us for our baggage. We become more comfortable with uncertainty. We become more loving and the best version of ourselves.

Your history will repeat itself if you ignore taking these inward steps to deal with it. Or, as Mark Twain put it, “The past does not repeat itself, but it will rhyme.”

Formative events in childhood don’t have to be horrific for them to wreak havoc on our adult relationships. This book is about becoming aware of how



buried or neglected events from our past can ruin our relationships. Embedded interpersonal dysfunction stems from family trauma, especially parental PTSD, myths, secrets, and suppressed experiences that distort one's self-perception. Self-awareness helps us create a personal narrative history. A strong life narrative serves as a cornerstone for a contented life, helping us be our best selves by developing secure attachments, rootedness, autonomy, and resilience.

As much as we need to raise well-loved children who mature into adulthood with these qualities, we must start with ourselves. Given how we live in our fast-paced world—so cut off from each other, especially in the digital era where we fail to even make eye contact with others—we need to be more psychologically astute. More than ever, we require keen self-awareness. If we lack this ability, we are likely to struggle—as individuals, as parents, in relationships, in groups, on the job, and in our health. Under pressure, we fall into counterproductive patterns that sabotage our lives.

This book explores the well-substantiated proposition in attachment theory, which posits that people who benefitted as children from a secure, loving bond with their primary caregivers have better odds of building successful relationships later in life. Unfortunately, not everyone has had the benefit of such a healthy upbringing. It is crucial to reflect on and flesh out your self-narrative for self-understanding and discovery. A lifelong story about yourself is grounding and serves as a fundamental basis to refresh, renew, and be your better self—the outcome of the therapeutic process. In the best of circumstances, we can help prevent victimized kids from growing into hateful, murderous adults, and we can help people speak out against the victimization of their fellow human beings. The responsibility to diminish inherited trauma and contribute to eliminating scapegoating rests with each of us.

Relationships provide a window for self-understanding and acceptance. Unfortunately, Charles Foster Kane lacked self-awareness and paid a terrible price—he may have been wealthy, but he was emotionally impoverished and unable to sustain meaningful relationships. Abandoned and betrayed as a child (tricked by his parents, who gave him up for adoption), the fictional Kane lost everything at the outset and had no possibility of recovery. But if Kane had insight into his misery, he would not have had to dig through a dusty attic to find his childhood sled. Instead, he could have discovered his

Rosebud by being aware of and thoughtful about responding emotionally to the significant people in his life.

It may seem obvious, but for so many people, the obvious is invisible because, like Kane, people don't have the know-how to understand why it's important to become self-reflective. Kane failed to recapture Rosebud because he remained stuck in a reactive, triggered existence rather than a self-reflective, examined, introspective life.

## Our Journey out of Darkness

There are three primary, interrelated processes we will be using in our journey out of psychic darkness.

### MINDFUL SELF-REFLECTION

The first process, fundamental to all, is mindful self-reflection. Such reflection is a two-part process of focused self-exploration; it involves going inward and upward, beginning with identifying our physical sensations and labeling our emotions, our feelings. Then we think about what they mean. I call it "intro-spectate," combining introspective (looking inward) with spectate (looking on, as a spectator).

Mentalizing is self-reflection that leads to awareness of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes when interacting with others. Reflecting on someone else's perspective allows us to rethink our assessment of their behavior and may alter our reaction to it.

Unfortunately, most of us shy away from this internal spelunking. The first shot in the *Citizen Kane* movie is a sign on the gate of Kane's mansion that reads No Trespassing. Our psychological "stuff" can feel off-limits, but soon you will understand how and why we need to cross this boundary. Once you start paying attention to your emotional reactions and patterns, you ask yourself many relevant "why" questions; these are the least threatening because they are rational and cut off from emotion. Our defense mechanisms keep emotions from emerging into consciousness and make the focus an intellectual rather than an introspective one. They are very sensible questions:

- Why am I always at loggerheads with my boss?
- Why do I view myself as a kind, thoughtful person yet act in ways that can be mean-spirited and reactive?
- Why do I feel dissatisfied, restless, and unhappy even though I've achieved many life goals?

The answer to all these questions is: You don't know yourself as well as you should—or as well as you think.

On the other hand, an introspectively seasoned person is in touch with the true inner sage, and will first ask “what” questions, denoting curiosity about describing an internal process. For example:

- What am I feeling in my body?
- What is the story I am telling in my mind's eye?
- What just happened between us that I suddenly feel crestfallen?

## STORYTELLING

The second process we'll explore, storytelling, is creating a straightforward, personal narrative. Contrary to what we might think, people tend to sanitize their stories; for example, they'll often say “I grew up normal with good parents” when the reality is darker and more complex.

Neuroscience confirms that having a real, multidimensional, replicable lifelong narrative—a story—promotes healing and solidifies identity. Introspection utilizes active brain regions responsible for defining yourself and having a clear physical and psychological self-perception. Developing a personal record entails going back to early childhood and, if possible, previous generations to explore what may have happened, then describing it in detail.

Like myself, many of us have parents who survived horrible situations—wars, extreme poverty, and exile. Given the reality that the effects of trauma are heritable, we should attend to secrets and lies, betrayals and misunderstandings—any incident that creates feelings of shame, anger, embarrassment, and other disturbing emotions.

By recalling and articulating the circumstances that created these painful feelings, we demystify what took place in the past. It can no longer control us. Simultaneously, our autonomic nervous system is regulated; we have healthy blood pressure and low levels of stress hormones, and we are calm and even-keeled.

## WRITING

The third process is expressive, creative, and reflective writing. Journaling and letter writing are more structured yet relaxed ways to address and disempower present-day pain and past hurts. The act of writing demands that we think about how we feel and what we wish to convey. Writing requires choosing words carefully. Science confirms that writing solidifies memory encoding, which is the most reliable and consistent way of remembering our stories without modification and can keep our narrative going.

Knowing our emotions is crucial, since our feelings may be rooted in past events that have no context today yet can control our attitudes and behaviors. Thus, learning to spot emotional shifts in the present can draw us to the origins of behavioral repetitions.

To better understand these three processes, I'm also going to share my experiences growing up with Holocaust survivor parents.

Children of survivors are called second-generation children of survivors or "2gs." Being a 2g had everything to do with why I became a science researcher, medical doctor, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst. When you read my story, you will understand the underpinnings of the kind of trauma that seeps through each of us nonverbally. I've applied mindfulness to my own life. Being aware of and learning from my emotional responses and seeing how they connect to events from my past is mostly an automatic function these days. Throughout the book, I'll demonstrate what I think, feel, and do in response to patients and situations.

Our behavior as adults depends on multiple coincident influences that impact us throughout our lives. Our upbringing by our parents, our genetics, belief systems, family, secrets, environment, cultural values, and personal history—these all have affected our development and the formation of our personality.

Professionals refer to this integrated, holistic approach to patient care as bio-psycho-social. A first step to getting out of the dark is to label and become consciously aware of our own, often unconscious, negative emotions, beliefs, and distorted thoughts, and in this way, we can integrate painful emotions with historical facts and personal narratives.

Personal insight makes us wiser.

## About This Book

As a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, child of Holocaust survivors, and a former associate clinical professor at the UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, I have professional, personal, and academic expertise. I have a rich trove of stories to tell—in the pages ahead, stories of my patients and my own life—and a sleuthing process that I will share. Be aware that the format for the book's first four sections focuses on critical psychological concepts, with small parts of my narrative included. In contrast, parts five and six utilize my story to emphasize how these essential concepts are embedded and necessary for my life's narrative.

I'm calling your attention to the difference between the first four sections and the last two because it affects the book's style. While the first half includes a number of patient stories, my objective is to use them to foster insights into complex concepts about the inner mind and relationships that are often out of awareness or misunderstood. Therefore, this first half focuses on psychological ideas within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

In part five, "The Doctor Discloses," the tone shifts as I tell my stories in detail, especially the stories of my mother and father and how their narratives affected me growing up. Sometimes the stories are told from my childhood memory but are annotated with a mindful, reflective commentary. While writing this book, I've experienced many unexpected but welcome epiphanies, adding meaning to my life's narrative—and probably bundles of new brain cells and neuronal connections! I describe how and why storytelling and sharing have created greater clarity about my history. I try to reveal all the benefits of living life reflectively and with empathy.

Though these two parts of the book are somewhat different on the surface, they connect on a deeper level. As you'll discover, they each hold a mirror up to the other—the psychological concepts shine a light on my story, and my account illustrates—by way of interpretation—an understanding of these concepts. Together, they form a reading experience that I hope you'll enjoy and learn from. I trust you will follow my journey and gain a fresh outlook on looking inward. Then, we can avoid what George Santayana famously warned us about: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."