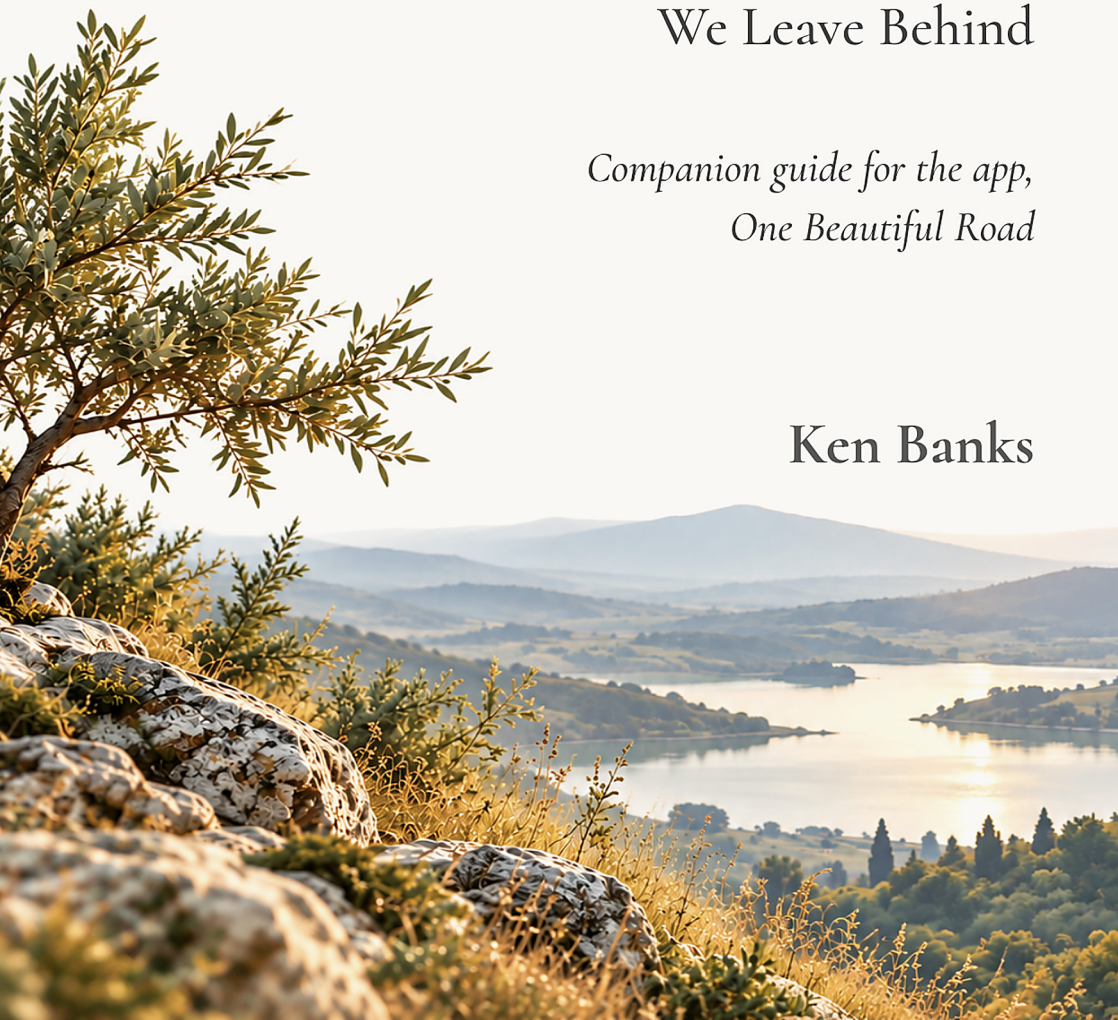
One Beautiful Road

Beautifully Borrowed

Twelve Reflections on Mortality, Attention and What We Leave Behind

Companion guide for the app, One Beautiful Road

Ken Banks



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About the Author

Ken Banks has spent most of his life seeking ways of helping others.

He is best known as the founder of kiwanja.net and the creator of FrontlineSMS, a pioneering communication platform that enabled organisations and communities in some of the world's most challenging environments to use simple text messages to create change. Originally developed to enable conservationists to engage communities in places without Internet access, FrontlineSMS went on to be used globally in healthcare, education, human rights, election monitoring and disaster response - among many others - reaching tens of millions of people and helping reshape our thinking around how the ethical and responsible use of technology might help create meaningful change.

Ken's work has been recognised internationally. He has received numerous awards for innovation and social entrepreneurship, including honours from National Geographic and his peers in Silicon Valley. His ideas have been shared at global gatherings and institutions as

examples of how humility, openness and trust can lead to more ethical and effective change. Through his organisation kiwanja.net, Ken focused on building tools that communities could adapt, reshape and ultimately own for themselves. Rather than scaling control, his work consistently prioritised agency, local knowledge and long-term resilience over short-term impact or visibility.

In recent years Ken's writing has increasingly explored the relationship between mortality, attention and the way we choose to live. Beautifully Borrowed extends the themes of The Little Book of Mindful Social Change, asking what changes when we remember that our time, our relationships and even the world around us are only ever entrusted to us for a while.

Drawing on Buddhist ideas such as impermanence, mindfulness, compassion and non-attachment, together with lessons gathered through decades of travel and humanitarian work, the book reflects on how an awareness of life's transience can deepen our gratitude, sharpen our sense of purpose and encourage us to leave the world a little better than we found it. It is an invitation to slow down, notice more carefully, and live with greater humility, kindness and care.

Welcome to the One Beautiful Road companion version of Beautifully Borrowed

This book grew out of questions *The Little Book of Mindful Social Change* didn't have room to answer.

While that book was written for anyone trying to do good in the world, this one is for those trying to make sense of the fact that their time to do so is limited.

The questions that interest me now are often the quieter ones. What does it mean to live well when we know that everything we love is temporary? How might our lives change if we paid closer attention to the ordinary moments that are so easily overlooked? What do we owe to the people, places and communities that briefly become part of our lives, and to those who will come after us?

And, perhaps most importantly, what will remain when we are gone?

I don't pretend to have found the answers. These are simply reflections gathered from a life spent travelling, working, paying attention and, increasingly, learning to let go. They are about mortality, but also about gratitude, about the things we cannot keep, and the freedom that can come from holding them more lightly.

They are also reflections about curiosity, understanding when and what is enough, small choices and the quiet influence we have on lives we may never fully know.

The title comes from a realisation last summer that very little in life truly belongs to us. The places we inhabit, the knowledge we inherit, the relationships we treasure, even the time we are given are all, in some sense, borrowed. Someone cared for these things before us, and someone will inherit them after. We arrive, add something of ourselves, and eventually hand things on.

Perhaps that changes the question. Instead of asking what we can accumulate, we might ask what we can leave in good order. Instead of worrying about how much of the world we can change, we might pay more attention to the small corner entrusted to us, and to leaving it a little better than we found it. And instead of waiting for life to

become extraordinary, we might become a little better at noticing how extraordinary it already is.

Most of us will never be remembered by name. But we will all be ancestors of a kind, to the people we raise, teach, work beside and quietly influence, and to others we will never meet. The question is not whether we leave something behind. It is what.

Reflection alone only takes us so far. At some point the question shifts from what we think to what we will do.

That is why this edition has a companion. *One Beautiful Road* is an app for turning care into action, and this book is where that care begins. The book is the reflection, the app is the action. One helps you pause and consider the world you are handing on. The other helps you do something about it - small things worth doing, stories worth hearing, conversations worth having and, when it feels right, causes worth supporting.

Being a good ancestor need not be dramatic. For most of us it looks like small, steady choices, made because they are right, not because anyone is watching. In the app there are no leaderboards, no streaks and nothing to share. You can read this book without the app, and use

the app without the book, but they were made to be enjoyed together.

The twelve reflections that follow are an invitation to begin.

I hope you find something here that makes you pause, look again and perhaps see your own life a little differently. And I hope that, when you close the book, you step back into the world with fresh eyes, ready to do something small and good for those who come after, mindful that everything we hold is, and always has been, beautifully borrowed.

Reflection One

Everything is Borrowed

Nothing truly belongs to us

Many years ago I found myself sitting in a small patch of cool, dimly-lit forest in the middle of a Ugandan nature reserve. I had walked there to escape the savannah heat for a couple of hours, but as I looked up into the enormous branches of a nearby tree I couldn't help but wonder how many generations of people had sat in that very same spot and done exactly the same thing. Long before I arrived others had rested in the shade, shared food beneath the canopy, sheltered from storms or simply paused for a few quiet moments before continuing their journey. Long after I had gone, countless others would likely do the same.

The tree belonged to none of us.

That thought stayed with me. It challenged an assumption I hadn't realised I was carrying. We spend much of our lives talking about my house, my career, my achievements, my possessions and even my time, as though ownership were the natural condition of things. Yet, the longer I've lived, the more those words have begun to soften around the edges.

The truth is that very little ever truly belongs to us.

The places we love were here before we arrived and, if we care for them well enough, they will remain after we have gone. The knowledge we possess has been gathered from teachers, friends, books and strangers. Even our own bodies are constantly changing, quietly reminding us that permanence is something we imagine more often than we experience.

For many years I worked alongside conservationists in different parts of Africa, including a long stretch with one particular primate sanctuary in Nigeria. One lesson returned again and again, whether we were talking about forests, wildlife or fragile ecosystems. Healthy landscapes are not owned so much as cared for. They survive because, for a while, someone accepts responsibility for them before passing that responsibility on to someone else. I remember Jerry, my Nigerian colleague, once putting it more plainly than I ever managed. He reminded me that we were never the owners of that place - only its custodians.

I have come to think that perhaps our lives are much the same.

There is a Japanese expression, *mono no aware*, which describes a gentle awareness that everything is transient,

and that it is precisely this transience which makes life beautiful. Blossom is precious because it falls. Childhood is precious because it passes. Friendships deepen because we know, however reluctantly, that they cannot last forever in the form they take today.

At first glance this can seem a melancholy way of looking at the world.

I have found the opposite to be true.

Once we stop expecting permanence, gratitude quietly takes its place. We become less concerned with possessing experiences and more interested in inhabiting them. Success becomes less about accumulation and more about stewardship. Instead of asking what we can keep, we begin asking what has been entrusted to us, and how faithfully we might care for it while it is still ours to hold.

This understanding didn't arrive suddenly. It emerged slowly, through years of travelling, conversations with remarkable people and long periods of simply paying attention. Looking back, I can see that many of the people I admired most had this quality. They carried their achievements lightly. They spoke of places with affection

rather than ownership, and of success less as something they had earned than as an opportunity to be useful.

Perhaps they understood something I was only beginning to learn.

Our lives are less like possessions than they are like borrowed books. We receive them carrying the fingerprints of those who came before us, we add a few notes of our own in the margins, and one day we quietly pass them into someone else's hands.

What matters, then, is not how tightly we hold on, but how well we care for what has been entrusted to us.

Reflection Two

The Privilege of Being Here

The ordinary is never ordinary

One of the great privileges of spending time in different parts of the world is that familiar things begin to look unfamiliar again.

After spending time in various rural communities I would often return home and notice things that had previously escaped me. The reliable flow of clean water from a tap. Shelves full of food. A train arriving within seconds of its scheduled time. Streetlights quietly illuminating the road on a winter evening. None of these things had changed. What had changed was the attention I paid to them.

It made me realise how quickly gratitude fades when familiarity takes over.

Human beings are wonderfully adaptable creatures. We recover from disappointment, adjust to new circumstances and gradually become accustomed to things that once filled us with excitement or relief. It's an ability that has helped us survive, but it has unintended consequences, too. We stop noticing the quiet miracles that surround us each day.

I don't use the word miracle in a biblical sense. I simply mean the astonishing fact that these things exist at all.

That we are able to sit beneath trees planted by previous generations, hold conversations with people whose paths would otherwise never have crossed our own, listen to birds singing on a spring morning or watch sunlight move slowly across a room. These moments are so ordinary that they barely register, yet if they disappeared tomorrow we would realise immediately how extraordinary they had always been.

Some of the people who have influenced me most over the years owned very little by conventional standards. I often think of Justice Kabango, a talented artist I met many years ago in Zambia, who possessed an ease and generosity that seemed strangely independent of material wealth. He laughed easily, shared what he had without hesitation and found joy in things that many of us rush past without a second glance.

I have often wondered whether contentment grows less from having more than from noticing more.

Mortality sharpens our thinking. Not to make us dwell on death, but to remind us that even the most ordinary of days is quietly unrepeatable. This morning, with its particular light, conversations, worries and possibilities, will never exist again. Tomorrow will bring something

new. Before long this season of our lives will have become a memory, just as countless seasons before it.

Seen in that light, life begins to feel less like something we own and more like something we are continually being invited to experience.

That invitation is easy to overlook because it rarely arrives with fanfare. More often it appears disguised as an ordinary Tuesday, a shared meal with friends, a walk taken without purpose or a conversation that lingers in the mind long after it has ended. Only later do we realise that these unremarkable moments were quietly becoming the fabric of our lives.

Perhaps that is why paying attention matters so much. Not because every moment is equally significant, but because we never know which ordinary day will turn into one with memories we treasure most. And perhaps that is reason enough to greet each day, however imperfect it may seem, with a little more curiosity, a little more gratitude and a renewed awareness of the extraordinary privilege of simply being here.

Reflection Three

Attention is an Act of Love

We cannot care deeply about what we never really notice

Many years ago, during a trip to Zimbabwe, I spent time with a ranger named Richard whose knowledge of the landscape seemed almost supernatural. We could walk the same path together, yet where I saw little more than grass, trees and the occasional bird, he noticed tracks pressed lightly into the earth, broken branches, distant alarm calls and subtle changes in the behaviour of animals that I would never have detected on my own.

He wasn't seeing a different landscape. He was paying a different kind of attention.

It struck me then that expertise is often less about knowing more than about noticing more. During his time as a soldier Richard had spent many years in the bush learning to observe patiently, and because he noticed what others overlooked he was able to react before small problems became bigger ones. The survival of a species, or the safety of a community, sometimes depends on details that most people would have walked straight past.

That lesson has stayed with me ever since.

The older I become the more convinced I am that attention is one of the purest forms of care. Before we protect something we first have to notice it. Before we

understand another person we have to listen. Before we begin to heal a damaged relationship, a struggling community or a fragile ecosystem, we have to be willing to look closely enough to see what is really there.

Perhaps this is why so many of the world's problems persist. It is not always because people lack compassion, but because they've never really seen what is happening. Distance has a way of reducing people to statistics, and forests to maps. We become familiar with headlines but remain strangers to the very real lives they describe.

Travel taught me to be suspicious of first impressions. Places that seemed 'poor' often revealed extraordinary richness. Places that appeared prosperous sometimes concealed deep loneliness. Again and again, life has reminded me that the first thing we notice rarely reveals the whole story.

The same is true much closer to home. How often do we really look at the people we love? How often do we notice when someone is carrying a burden they haven't spoken about, or recognise the quiet ways in which they care for us every day? Familiarity can make us attentive, but it can also make us careless. We assume we already know

someone, and in doing so we stop discovering who they become over time.

I sometimes wonder whether love itself is less a feeling than a practice of sustained attention. To love a place is to notice when it is changing. To love another person is to remain curious about them long after the novelty has worn off. To love the natural world is to recognise that we are part of it rather than merely passing through it.

None of this requires dramatic gestures. It begins with the simple decision to slow down long enough to notice what has always been there.

The world has never lacked beauty, kindness or wonder. What it often lacks is people who are willing to pause long enough to see it.

Reflection Four

Enough

Contentment begins when comparison loosens its grip

There was a time when I believed that fulfilment lay somewhere in the future. After the next project. The next journey. The next opportunity.

Looking back I suspect many of us live with some version of that story. We imagine that life will become more complete once a particular goal has been met, but there's always another horizon beyond the one we've just reached. Contentment often remains stubbornly out of reach.

Travel challenged that assumption in unexpected ways. Over the years I met people whose material circumstances were unimaginably difficult, yet whose generosity seemed almost effortless. Throughout my time working across Africa I regularly met people who had almost nothing by any measure I'd grown up with, yet they gave more freely than most people I knew at home. There I knew people who possessed every outward sign of success, yet they remained quietly dissatisfied, forever chasing the next achievement or acquisition.

Neither experience proves that wealth is unimportant. Security matters, and poverty is not something to romanticise. But it did persuade me that fulfilment and accumulation are not quite the same thing.

Somewhere along the way I began asking a different question. Not ‘How much more do I need?’ but ‘Do I already have enough?’

It is a surprisingly difficult question to answer because our culture often discourages us from asking it. We’re surrounded by messages that try to convince us that happiness is always just one purchase, one promotion or one improvement away. And comparison has become so woven into everyday life that we hardly notice its presence. We compare careers, homes, holidays, appearances and achievements, often forgetting that we are comparing our own complicated lives with carefully edited versions of someone else's.

Nature offers a quieter perspective. A woodland never appears anxious about becoming a rainforest, and an oak tree does not measure its worth against a cedar. Each grows according to its own nature, shaped by the conditions in which it finds itself. There is a quiet confidence in that, and I often wonder what we might learn if we paid closer attention to it.

Recognising that we have enough does not mean abandoning ambition or ceasing to care about injustice. There is still work to be done, problems to solve and

suffering that demands our response. Instead it means loosening our attachment to the idea that our own lives must constantly become bigger in order to become better.

That has become one of the gentlest lessons of growing older. I find myself taking greater pleasure in conversations that have no purpose beyond companionship, in walks where the destination hardly matters and in evenings spent with people whose company asks nothing of me except that I am fully present. None of these experiences would have seemed particularly remarkable to the younger me. Now they feel quietly abundant.

Perhaps 'enough' is not a destination we eventually reach but a way of seeing the life that is already unfolding around us. If that is true then contentment is available far more often than we imagine - not because our circumstances have changed, but because our attention has.

Reflection Five

The Weight of Small Choices

Our lives are shaped less by dramatic moments than by the quiet decisions we make every day

Looking back it is easy for me to identify the moments that changed the direction of my life, even if the change itself was far from easy.

Choosing to leave behind a comfortable life in search of something meaningful. Taking on jobs I didn't feel able to do. Boarding planes to places I had previously only seen in magazines. Meeting people whose generosity and brilliance quietly challenged my assumptions about the world and about myself. While these milestones still feel significant, they were not isolated turning points so much as the visible outcomes of countless smaller decisions that had been unfolding for years.

Most of life happens almost unnoticed.

We decide whether to greet a neighbour, whether to stop and listen when someone wants to talk, whether to buy something we don't really need or whether to take the longer route simply because it passes through a place we enjoy. None of these choices feels especially important, yet together they become the pattern of our days, and eventually the pattern of our lives.

I have often wondered why we place so much emphasis on extraordinary achievements while overlooking the

quiet habits that make them possible. Anyone who has spent time building something - a piece of software, a garden, a friendship - knows it rarely arrives fully formed. It is added to, line by line, season by season, in decisions too small to notice at the time. The natural world understands this instinctively. A forest does not appear overnight, but grows leaf by leaf. Rivers carve valleys not through sudden force but through patient persistence.

Perhaps we should be less surprised that human lives unfold in much the same way.

When people ask about the work I have done over the years, they sometimes imagine that it began with a grand plan. The reality is rather different. Much of it emerged through curiosity, chance encounters and a willingness to say yes to opportunities whose significance only became clear much later. Looking backwards a coherent story begins to emerge. Living through it, however, it rarely felt coherent at all.

There is something reassuring about that. It reminds us that we do not need to have every step mapped out before taking the first one. We only need to choose, as thoughtfully as we can, the next step that lies before us.

The same is true of the choices we make with other people, and with the living world. We often underestimate the influence of seemingly insignificant actions because their consequences are difficult to see. A word of encouragement may alter the course of someone's confidence for years to come. A tree planted today may still be offering shade long after we are gone. An act of care towards a river, a woodland or a neighbourhood becomes part of a larger story whose ending we are unlikely ever to witness.

This has gradually changed the way I think about responsibility. Instead of asking whether one action will change the world, I find myself asking a gentler question. What sort of world does this action help to create?

Most of the time it's a question that has no easy answer. But it encourages me to live a little more deliberately, aware that every ordinary day offers countless opportunities to shape the future in ways I may never fully understand.

Perhaps that's all any of us can do. And perhaps it's more than enough.

Reflection Six

Leave Places Better Than You Found Them

Every encounter leaves the world slightly different

One of the simplest pieces of advice I was ever given was to leave a campsite exactly as you had found it. Pack away your belongings, take your litter home and, if possible, leave the place in even better condition than when you arrived. It was practical advice, but over the years it came to feel like something much bigger than that.

Eventually I realised it was more of a philosophy.

The principle extends far beyond the natural world. We move through countless places every day, though not all of them have a physical location. We enter conversations, friendships, organisations, families and communities. We become part of other people's stories, sometimes only briefly, sometimes for many years. Wherever we go, we leave traces of ourselves behind.

The question is rarely whether we will have an influence. The question is what kind of influence we will have.

When I think about the people who have shaped my own life I don't remember them because they had the loudest voices, or because they were the most accomplished individuals. I think of Freddie Cooper, who ran our local club, who had a way of making others feel heard, of noticing potential before it was fully visible and of

offering up opportunities long before it was obvious how significant they might be.

At the time he probably thought very little of it. Yet those small acts accumulated and became something much bigger.

The same is true of places. Over the years I have walked through forests recovering from logging, landscapes beginning to heal after years of neglect and communities rebuilding themselves after periods of conflict or hardship. None of that recovery happened quickly. It was the result of thousands of patient decisions made by people who understood that restoration is usually an act of persistence rather than spectacle.

There is something profoundly hopeful in that idea. It suggests that the opposite is true as well. Just as neglect accumulates, so too does care. Every thoughtful conversation, every generous act, every piece of litter picked up, every young person encouraged, every habitat restored and every tree planted contributes, however modestly, to the character of the world we share.

We rarely witness the full consequences of our actions because they continue long after we have moved on. That

uncertainty can sometimes feel frustrating, particularly when change seems painfully slow. Yet it is also an invitation to humility. We are participants in a much longer story, contributing our small chapter before handing it on to those who follow.

Seen this way, success looks rather different. It is no longer measured solely by what we achieve during our own lifetime, but by what we enable others to build after we have gone. The finest cathedrals, forests and institutions were never the work of one generation. They emerged because people were willing to invest in a future they knew they would never fully experience.

I find that thought deeply comforting. It reminds me that our responsibility is not to complete the story, but simply to ensure that, when our own part is over, the world is a little kinder, a little healthier and a little more hopeful because we happened to pass this way.

Reflection Seven

You Are Not the Centre of the Story

The world becomes larger when we learn to occupy a smaller place within it

One of the greatest privileges of travelling has been the opportunity to spend time in places where I was the clear outsider. I rarely spoke the local language, seldom understood all the customs and often depended on the generosity and patience of people who had no particular reason to help me. It was a humbling experience, one that reminded me that the world had been carrying on perfectly well long before I arrived.

There is a quiet freedom in that realisation.

When we're young so much of our life naturally revolves around, and builds upon, our own story. We think about our ambitions, our disappointments and our hopes for the future because they are the experiences we know most intimately. There is nothing unusual about this. It is simply how consciousness begins. If we are fortunate, life gradually introduces us to a wider perspective.

Travel was one of the teachers that did this for me. Again and again I found myself sitting with people whose lives bore little resemblance to my own, listening to stories shaped by different histories, cultures and landscapes. The more I listened the more I realised that every person carries a world within them that can never be fully seen

from the outside. Each conversation became a reminder that my understanding was often incomplete.

That lesson has become increasingly important as I have grown older. It is remarkably easy to mistake familiarity for understanding. We assume we know our friends because we have known them for years, our neighbours because we pass them regularly, or people from other countries because we have read about them in newspapers or watched documentaries. Yet every individual remains far more complex than our first impressions, or even a long acquaintance, can ever reveal.

Perhaps curiosity is another form of humility. To remain curious about another person is to acknowledge that there is always more to discover. It is to resist reducing them to a single opinion, profession or chapter of their life. The same is true of places. A city is never just its skyline, nor a forest simply its trees. Every landscape carries countless stories that reveal themselves only to those willing to spend time paying attention.

Nature has always seemed remarkably comfortable with this idea. No single species dominates a healthy ecosystem. Even the largest animals depend upon countless smaller organisms whose names many of us will

never know. Remove the fungi from a woodland or the insects from a meadow and the balance begins to falter. Importance is shared, even if attention is not.

I sometimes wonder whether human societies become healthier when we remember this. Much of modern life encourages us to cultivate a personal brand, build an audience or establish a reputation. There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting our work to matter, but significance and visibility are not the same thing. Some of the most influential people I have known have lived lives that would appear entirely ordinary from the outside. Their gift was not that they attracted attention but that they gave it. They made others feel valued, listened generously and quietly strengthened the people and communities around them.

As I look back over the years, those are the people I remember most. Their example has gradually changed the questions I ask of myself. Instead of wondering how successful I might become, I find myself wondering whether I have been useful, whether I have encouraged others and whether the people who crossed my path found their own lives just a little richer because our stories briefly overlapped.

That seems a gentler ambition. It also feels rather closer to the way the natural world works where every living thing contributes something to the whole, even if few of them ever occupy the centre of the stage.

Reflection Eight

Practice Letting Go

The rhythm of life is not learning how to hold on,
but learning what we can release

A few years ago I opened a box that had followed me through several house (and country) moves without ever being fully unpacked. Inside were old diaries, postcards with folded corners, faded photographs, airline tickets and even a pair of unwashed socks from my first ever trip to Africa in 1993. Some immediately carried me back to another time and place. Others seemed almost anonymous, and I found myself wondering why I had considered them important enough to keep.

The experience was unexpectedly revealing.

At one stage of my life every object in that box had represented something I believed I might one day need or want to remember. Yet time had quietly altered their significance. Most of what truly remained from those years was no longer contained in the objects themselves but in the person I had gradually become because of the experiences they represented.

That distinction feels increasingly important.

As we move through life we gather all sorts of things, and not just possessions. We collect ambitions, opinions, identities and expectations. We become attached to ways of thinking about ourselves, sometimes without noticing

how tightly we are holding on. It is comforting to believe we know who we are and where our lives are heading.

Life, however, has a habit of gently challenging those assumptions. Careers change. Relationships evolve. Children become adults. Parents grow older. Good health, which once seemed almost permanent, begins to reveal itself as a gift rather than a guarantee. Some dreams are fulfilled, while others quietly dissolve, making space for possibilities we could never have imagined when we were younger.

None of this is easy. Loss, in all its forms, asks something of us that we rarely volunteer willingly. Yet over the years I have met people who carried profound grief without becoming defined by it. Humanitarians, among them, who experienced the worst of humanity and yet didn't decide not to care, and who realised that acceptance was not the same as resignation. It is an acknowledgement that life continues to unfold according to rhythms much older and wiser than our own plans.

Nature returns to this every year. Autumn is not a failure of summer, nor is winter evidence that life has disappeared. The tree that sheds its leaves is not giving up but is preparing for another season of growth. What

appears, for a time, to be an ending often turns out to be part of a much longer cycle.

I have found that thought quietly reassuring. It reminds me that letting go is not always about losing something. Sometimes it is about creating the space in which something new can emerge. We release old assumptions in order to keep learning. We loosen our grip on certainty in order to remain curious. We forgive because we no longer wish to carry the past's weight into the future.

This is not a lesson that can be mastered once and for all. Life keeps offering fresh opportunities to practise it, and I suspect it always will.

Perhaps wisdom is not found in finally becoming detached from everything we love, but in learning to hold the people, places and experiences that matter most with gratitude rather than possession.

After all, if everything is borrowed, then perhaps the kindest way to hold it is with open hands.

Reflection Nine

The Things That Outlive Us

We leave more behind than we ever realise

Some years ago, after giving a keynote talk at a mobile technology event in Cannes, someone waited until everyone else had left before coming over to introduce themselves. We had never met before, yet they began describing a presentation I'd made many years earlier at a completely different event. I had forgotten almost everything about that day, but they remembered one particular piece of advice I'd given and told me how it had quietly influenced a decision they later made about the direction of their own life.

I remember feeling slightly uncomfortable. Not because of what they said, but because I had no recollection of offering anything particularly profound. The words had been spoken, the day had ended and I had simply moved on to whatever came next. Yet something I had long since forgotten had continued its journey without me.

That encounter has stayed with me ever since because it reminded me how little we understand the ways our lives touch those of other people.

Most influence is invisible. We tend to notice the dramatic examples - famous speeches, celebrated books or moments that appear to alter the course of history. Yet if we look honestly at our own lives we usually discover

that many of the things that shaped us came from quieter sources. A teacher who believed in us before we believed in ourselves. A colleague who encouraged us at exactly the right moment. A friend who asked a question that lingered in our minds for years afterwards.

I often think of influence as seeds carried on the wind. Most fall where nothing grows. Some disappear almost immediately. Others settle unnoticed until, long afterwards, the conditions are right for something to emerge. The person who scattered them may never know what became of them.

There is something deeply liberating about this. It reminds us that we are not responsible for controlling outcomes. We are simply responsible for offering the best of ourselves while we have the opportunity.

The natural world seems to understand this instinctively. An old oak tree does not produce acorns for its own benefit. Rivers nourish landscapes they will never see from beginning to end. Coral reefs are built over centuries by creatures so small that they seem almost insignificant on their own, yet together they create entire worlds for other forms of life.

Human lives are woven together in much the same way. Everything we inherit has been entrusted to us by people we will never meet. The languages we speak, the knowledge we rely on, the parks we enjoy, the freedoms we often take for granted and even many of the trees beneath which we find shade all exist because others were willing to think beyond the boundaries of their own lifetime.

Perhaps that is one of the quiet responsibilities of being alive. We are not simply consumers of the world that previous generations created. We are also its temporary custodians, adding something of ourselves before passing it on.

Whether that inheritance takes the form of a restored woodland, a kinder community, a curious child, an encouraging conversation or simply an example of a life lived thoughtfully hardly matters. What matters is that something of us continues to nourish the lives of people we will never meet, or know.

Reflection Ten

Live Close to Wonder

Curiosity is one of gratitude's closest companions

When I was a child almost everything felt like a mystery. How did birds know when to migrate? How could seeds become trees? What lay beyond the horizon? How could something like space go on forever? Even the smallest discoveries carried the excitement of entering a world that felt endlessly larger than my own.

Growing older has answered many of those questions. It has also taught me that the best answers usually give rise to even better questions.

One of the greatest gifts of travel has been the opportunity to remain a beginner. Arriving somewhere unfamiliar has a way of stripping away the comforting illusion that we understand how the world works. Suddenly the smallest details become fascinating. Why are houses built this way? Why do people celebrate this particular festival? How have they learned to live alongside drought, elephants or conflict?

These questions are not simply asked to acquire information. They are expressions of respect. To ask sincere questions is to acknowledge that another person, another culture or another landscape has something to teach us. Curiosity begins where certainty loosens its grip.

I sometimes wonder whether this is why wonder feels so closely connected to humility. The more I have learned about the natural world the less inclined I have become to believe that I understand it. Every ecosystem reveals another layer of complexity. Every scientific discovery seems to uncover further mysteries waiting patiently beneath. Knowledge has never diminished my sense of awe. If anything it has deepened it.

The same is true of people. After decades of travelling and working alongside communities in different parts of the world, I have become less interested in quickly judging people and more interested in understanding the experiences that helped shape them. It is remarkable how often certainty gives way to compassion once we know a little more of someone else's story.

Perhaps this is one reason why curiosity matters so much. It protects us from becoming complacent. It reminds us that no matter how long we have lived, how much we have accomplished or how widely we have travelled, the world remains infinitely richer than our own understanding of it.

I hope I never lose that feeling. I hope I continue to notice unfamiliar bird songs and wonder where they

came from. I hope I keep asking questions when I meet someone whose life has followed a very different path from my own. I hope I never become so certain of my opinions that there is no longer room for surprise. These are all reasons why I now spend much of my time coaching and mentoring others, disciplines that are more about asking the right questions, not simply offering up answers.

Wonder is not something we leave behind in childhood. It is something we either continue to cultivate - or gradually allow to fade.

Perhaps that is why the world still feels as full of possibility to me now as it did when I first began exploring it all those years ago. Not because I have found the answers I was looking for, but because I have discovered that a life shaped by curiosity is richer than one built upon certainty.

And maybe that is one of the greatest privileges of all - to grow older without ever losing the desire to keep learning.

Reflection Eleven

Measure a Good Life Differently

The things that matter most are often the hardest to count

When I look back over my life I realise how many of the moments I treasure would have seemed entirely ordinary at the time.

There are memories of long conversations that drifted late into the evening without any particular purpose. Walks through unfamiliar landscapes where very little happened beyond the pleasure of noticing the changing light. Shared meals with people whose names might never come up again, yet whose kindness left an impression that has endured far longer than many more dramatic events.

None of these moments would have looked especially significant to anyone watching from the outside. That seems important.

Much of modern life encourages us to measure ourselves by things you can count. We record achievements, monitor progress, compare salaries, accumulate possessions and increasingly judge our lives by numbers displayed on screens. There is nothing inherently wrong with measurement. It has transformed medicine, science and countless other fields. Yet it can quietly persuade us that what is measurable must also be what matters most.

Experience suggests otherwise.

Trust cannot be counted. Neither can compassion, friendship or the quiet confidence that grows between people who have learned they can depend upon one another. The peace that comes from sitting by the sea at the end of a long day resists measurement just as stubbornly as the joy of hearing laughter in the next room, or watching your children discover something for the first time.

These are not achievements. They are experiences and representations of being fully alive.

As the years have passed I have found myself asking rather different questions from the ones that occupied me when I was younger. I still care about doing meaningful work, but I think less often about success and more often about usefulness. I worry less about whether my ideas are noticed and more about whether they are helpful. Increasingly, I find myself wondering whether I have given enough attention to the people who mattered, whether I have been generous with my time and whether I have cared well for the places through which I have travelled.

Those questions rarely produce simple answers. Perhaps they are not supposed to.

Good questions are companions rather than destinations. They walk beside us, gently reshaping our choices without demanding certainty. They remind us that a meaningful life is not something we achieve once and then possess forever. Like a garden, it requires patient tending, season after season, and each day offers another opportunity to begin again.

If there is a measure worth paying attention to, perhaps it lies here. Not in what we accumulated, but in what we nurtured. Not in how much attention we attracted, but in how much attention we gave. Not in the number of years we were granted, but in the care with which we inhabited them.

The older I become, the more those quieter measures seem to matter.

Reflection Twelve

When Today Becomes Yesterday

Every ordinary day is already becoming a memory

Every so often I find myself remembering a day that seemed entirely unremarkable while I was living it.

I might recall sitting on a bench after a long walk, sharing coffee with friends as evening slowly arrived, or watching the first light appear across a landscape that has long since changed. Nothing extraordinary happened. There was no great achievement, no important decision, no obvious reason why that particular day should have remained with me.

Yet somehow it did.

Perhaps memory has its own quiet wisdom. It seems less interested in preserving the occasions we imagined would define our lives than in holding on to moments when we were fully present without realising it. We remember how a place felt and smelt, the expression on someone's face, the sound of rain against a window or the silence that settled after a conversation had run its natural course. These sorts of memories are rarely dramatic but together they become the story of a life.

I sometimes wonder whether we spend too much energy waiting for life to 'feel better'. We imagine that contentment will arrive after the next promotion, the

next journey or the next success or award. Meanwhile, today's ordinary moments slip quietly into yesterday, carrying with them possibilities that we only recognise once they have passed. It is one of life's gentlest paradoxes that we often discover the value of a moment only when it has become a memory.

For me this has become one of mortality's greatest gifts. Not because it encourages us to dwell on endings, but because it quietly illuminates the present. It reminds us that every season is temporary, every friendship precious and every opportunity to show kindness both ordinary and unique. The awareness that our time is limited need not cast a shadow over life. It can instead sharpen our appreciation for everything that is here now, inviting us to notice more carefully the people, places and moments that so easily become invisible through familiarity.

Looking back, I don't think the years have taught me any great secrets. If they have taught me anything it is simply that life asks less of us than we often imagine. We do not have to solve every problem or accomplish every ambition. We cannot mend every injustice or heal every wound. What we can do is pay attention. We can care for the small corner of the world entrusted to us, treat

people with generosity, remain curious about lives different from our own and remember that our choices ripple further than we will ever know.

Perhaps that is enough.

Much of that forest where I took shelter from the sun all those years ago still stands, offering shade to people I will never meet and whose names I will never know. Those trees have never belonged to any of us, yet each generation has received its quiet gift, even for just a short while, before passing it on.

I have come to think that our lives are rather like that. We inherit a world shaped by people we will never meet and for a brief time we are invited to add something of ourselves before handing it to those who follow. We cannot control how long we are here, but we can choose how we inhabit the days we are given. We can choose to notice more, to hold things more lightly, to love more generously and to leave the places we pass through a little healthier than we found them.

When the time comes to hand the world on, I hope that is enough. And if this little book has offered anything at all, I hope it is simply an invitation to begin tomorrow

with fresh eyes, grateful for the ordinary privilege of being here, and mindful that everything we hold is, and always has been, beautifully borrowed.

“What you are is what you have been. What you will be is what you do now”

- Buddha

One Beautiful Road