

STIJN STAES

Becoming human again



BORGERHOFF
& LAMBERIGTS

*For my mother,
for this world,
for this life.*

With all my heart.

About this book

“In a world of uncertainty and fading ethics, your heart is a reliable compass that always stays with you. With warm language and vivid examples, Stijn unravels the doubts racing through your mind, weaving them into a beautiful metaphor hidden in the four chambers of a beating heart. Drawing from many conversations with open-hearted leaders, he offers the keys and foundations to let intuition guide you. A book to cherish on a bench in nature, gazing towards a bright future!”

— *Hans De Cuyper, CEO Ageas Group*

“This is a profound and inspiring book, stemming from a personal journey of loss and rediscovery. It encourages us to live from the heart and make genuine connections with others. Stijn offers valuable insights and practical keys to unlock the power of the heart and to live a meaningful life. An absolute must-read for anyone seeking true meaning and happiness.”

— *Leen Van den Neste, Chairman Executive Committee Vdk bank*

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Disclaimer

The examples described in this book are based on true events. To protect the privacy of those involved, some names have been changed.

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Introduction: work-life balance in a new world

This book germinated in 2017, on the day when I was unexpectedly fired from my job as change director. Injustice, shame, anger, sadness, resentment, and fear ran through my heart in quick succession. My heart was broken because I had to say goodbye to a position I had put my heart and soul into. How could this have happened? Thousands of questions flashed through my mind. I wanted clarity and started looking for answers and ways to accept what had occurred.

What makes someone a good leader or a good person? What knowledge, skills, and, on reflection, wisdom did I lack, and how come others were more successful than I had been? Power gives a person strength, and people who have a genuine impact on other people's lives are admirable. But how do you make sure you don't lapse into narcissism, toxicity, or people-pleasing? I was curious, and yes, also a little jealous of people who are labelled successful in our society.

Who else but top leaders and the most successful people could tell me what makes a leader truly successful and what makes a person truly happy? What is the essence of a true human being? The illusion that success and deep happiness are intrinsically linked to material wealth and prestige was (un)consciously deeply rooted in my brain. So I started a series of interviews with Belgium's leading and best-known CEOs: Wouter Torfs (CEO of Torfs, a shoe retailer), Bart De Smet (CEO of Ageas, an insurance company, and chairman of the Federation of Belgian Enterprises), Bart Claes (CEO of JBC, a clothes retailer), and many other internationally well-known inspirational figures like Katie Byron and David Gershon. They all took the stage with confidence and flair. Over the course of this journey, I slowly began to realise that it was not the external or the material world that made them successful, but their search for meaning and significance in life for themselves and others. They would ask themselves questions like: What is my place in this world? How can I serve others? How can I contribute to making this world a better place?

I unexpectedly bumped into deeper existential questions. Their answers were often surprisingly clear and insightful. Not that they had been spared misfortune and misery. Often quite the contrary. But their search

for meaning, their urge to grow and be truly meaningful were a true source of inspiration. Together with many other fascinating encounters over the past few years in my podcasts, on retreats, with coaches, family, and friends, new insights emerged and developed. They brought clarity and explained what successful leadership and leading a “happy” life are really about. And yes, what I sometimes still lacked: the way of the heart. The illusion that material prosperity is a measure of deep happiness faded and gave way to the power of the heart. So I could become human again. That was a confrontational realisation, but at the same time inspiring and enlightening because the solutions also gradually presented themselves. Those solutions — expressed through the four chambers of the heart, ten keys to unlock the power of the heart and nine foundations for living from the heart — slowly became clearer until they all took shape in this book.

In our current Western society, we are expected to answer every question with our heads or brain. Instead of doing what our hearts truly desire, we are stuck in an ultra-rational society that wants to solve and justify every problem with a rational answer. We live trying to live up to the expectations of others and constantly find excuses or justifications for not listening to our hearts. “Yes, but the pay is good. I have to think about my mortgage. The time isn’t right. Maybe when the children move out...” Subconsciously, we use all kinds of (obstructive) beliefs to avoid doing what is necessary and what our heart desires. As a result, we end up in a vicious circle, stuck in the rat race, and making no effort to change, even though we’re unhappy in our current situation. The apparent control over our current situation gives us a (false) sense of comfort and security. Change makes us anxious, because our mind doesn’t like it. So, we do nothing. Our social context, our upbringing, media, and politics often support such beliefs. They increase fear, making us even more anxious as we subconsciously integrate global drama into our own existence.

We need to realise that the world is in a constant state of change. We are currently living in a time when impactful crises and rapid changes occur one after another, often overlapping. This is happening on both an individual and a collective level: we are experiencing serious challenges

in every area of life. Think of digitalisation hitting every sector. Small shops disappearing. Where is your nearest bakery with fresh-baked goods? The physical counter in the bank, the post office, and just about every service company has now been replaced by a digital counter or a computer voice. We experience it in our own workplaces. Will our job still be relevant next year? Is there still a future for our children?

Added to this are the recent geopolitical crises in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as political polarisation. Dr Marc Gafni, an internationally renowned world philosopher, author, and leader of the movement for “a world religion in the context of our diversity”, calls this “the meta-crisis”. He includes the immense impact of artificial intelligence and the evolution of social media. What can we still trust as true, and who knows what about us? Who is at the wheel of our society? Will the gigatech companies become our new leaders? Will democracy survive? Such existential questions can trigger different reaction patterns that have become part of our lives, whether we want them to or not.

A few of us engage in *dooming*. Catastrophic thinking. “This is beyond repair.” This in turn can lead to a rampant form of materialism where we completely ignore the impact of our consumerism on people, animals, and the planet. Gloom and negativity take over our thinking and actions. It is clear that doom and gloom thinking is not getting us anywhere. A second reaction is full-blown *denial* of these problems. We either live without thinking of the consequences, or we withdraw completely into our hyper-individualised world where we only (want to) connect with like-minded people. Needless to say, this offers no way out. It leads to isolation and even more polarisation. Others try to create a new world order from a position of *dominance*. Driven by a specific worldview, they try to influence and control humanity, its actions, and its thinking. Just think of the deeply control-driven society in China, but also someone like Elon Musk, who is trying to create — or rather force — a new world shaped by his vision. We are witnessing a shift towards harsher language. Nothing is allowed to stand in the way of that one vision. If you don’t comply, you are mercilessly and forcefully excluded. These three positions or “the three Ds” can be found all over the world.

Fortunately, there is a fourth way. The way of the heart. Because these changes create opportunities to live your life differently instead of suffering. Changes allow other things into our lives. Not denial, but acceptance and connection to grow. Not domination and control, but freedom and profound joy. This book is an invitation to rediscover how we can truly connect with ourselves and others.

Since science entered our Western society several centuries ago, it has given us brilliant material prosperity. But this evolution also has a downside. Science has become our new religion. And science, by definition, is driven by the mind. When there is a problem, science seeks a (rational) explanation for it and comes up with a solution. Science has almost entirely replaced religion and spirituality in our society, but in doing so, it has also pushed aside the ancient supreme wisdom of life — a wisdom that is often elusive, offering answers to questions of meaning and existence we all deeply long for.

Above all, we must ask ourselves whether the solutions we come up with for the problems we have created are the “right” ones. Strangely enough, it is science that helps us discover that flip side. Because scientific research by the WHO (the World Health Organization), among others, shows that, despite material progress, a growing number of people struggle with a lack of meaning in their lives. This can undermine mental health, which translates into increasing stress, burnout complaints, and a declining sense of well-being. Moreover, they argue that lack of meaning also affects social cohesion, as people feel less connected to their work and environment. Between 2006 and 2020, the number of employed people in the EU who were absent from work due to their own illness or disability rose from 3.6 million to 5.2 million, representing about 2.7% to 2.9% of the employed population. This indicates a significant 44% increase over 14 years. Some countries, such as Germany, have since seen record-high sick leave days, suggesting rising intensity of absence in parts of the EU.

Social media are a catalyst for this phenomenon because they are a permanent invitation for distraction, constant diversion, and instant

gratification in the form of likes and reactions. The amount of stimuli and the constant flow of information makes our brain go haywire.

We are so focused on our mental capacities that we have forgotten about other sources of knowledge and energy. And that something even more powerful and profound exists beyond our mind or mental brain: our heart. According to research by the HartMath Institute, the heart’s electromagnetic field is up to a hundred times stronger than that of the brain and its magnetic radiation up to five thousand times stronger. When the heart is in a state of coherence (for example, during meditation, breathwork, or loving emotions), the brain can adopt this state, which in turn leads to better balance, focus, and deep feelings of happiness. As a result, we make decisions and take actions that lead to a healthier body and mind for both the individual and society as a whole.

Opening your heart and trusting it takes courage and deserves respect because there is always someone who has a different opinion. Few people are willing to share their personal experiences. The guests in the podcast open up about their ups and downs, their vulnerabilities, and blind spots, but most importantly, they talk about what — and who — helped them find answers to their deeper existential questions and how to cope with them. Their stories about the search for meaning and the answers they found will inspire you to stand in your own power, to lead, and to inspire others from the heart.

The conversations are often deeply confronting and, at the same time, enriching and eye-opening. They will awaken something in you and touch you deeply. When you listen to their doubts, fears, and insights, they can become allies for you in life. After all, doubts and fears are universal and necessary. By giving them the right place, you create space for new ideas and new actions. The next step is courage: the courage to act and, above all, to trust that little spark in your heart that tells you it is the right thing to do.

That stimulus, that heartwarming moment in a difficult period, that little heartbeat you feel when things are not going so well — we have to

learn to listen to that again. It is a sign that makes you realise what really matters and that you are allowed to follow your life's flow.

This is not just an individual issue. As a society we cannot and should not tolerate this form of mental domination (just as we discussed earlier the consequences of dooming behaviour, denial, and dominant position in life). It is uncharted and sometimes uncomfortable territory, especially in times where it is okay to preach harshness and coldness. That is why just as many people are looking for that deeper wisdom from the heart, for purpose to find an answer to this. Only a genuine and authentic belief that chaos creates possibilities helps us deal with constant change. That is our only certainty: that everything is constantly changing. Ultimately, the great challenge is not to get carried away by fear or distrust, but to create a new reality from a place of strength, a love for life, and joy.

*“Align your actions with the voice
of your heart: success guaranteed.”*

Stijn Staes

The above global challenges, the rampant use of social media, and unstoppable digitalisation cannot be underestimated. They cause us to become increasingly self-centred. As a result, loneliness is on the rise. Individualisation is spreading and intensifies the profound longing for meaning and spirituality. According to EU-wide data in 2023, approximately 13% of adults report feeling lonely most or all of the time, and about 30 million Europeans frequently feel lonely: shocking figures that show that we need to reconnect and take care of our “well-being”. But with what? With whom? And how?

First and foremost, with ourselves. Our hearts immediately indicate what truly gives us joy and pleasure, what our deep inner driving forces are. Then, we use our brain, our head, for what it is intended: the physical transposition of our deeper ideas, desires, and needs. Thus, we create and manifest our own life, perfect in its imperfection, with happiness and unhappiness. This holds new opportunities for ourselves and our society.

When was the last time your heart skipped a beat? That feeling you experience when you meet the love of your life? When you see a child smile at the sight of a butterfly? Or when you are told that you've landed the job you have been hoping for over the past months? Or when, after a long period of hard work, you experience the ultimate relaxation when a deer suddenly locks eyes with you during a walk in the woods? The heart is where everything originates, where your strength lies, and where you find yourself. Happiness resides in the heart; you experience the beauty of life when your heart is completely open. As Albert Einstein put it: mankind's problem is not atomic energy, it is its heart. Unfortunately, there is very little room left for chance, spontaneousness, or child-like wonder and playfulness. We need to recreate that space. We need to become human again.

From the heart, you establish the trusting relationship with yourself. You know what you are doing and why you are doing it. From there, you connect with your loved ones, your colleagues, your friends and family, and anyone who can help you in achieving your goal: extraordinary and simple. Listening to your heart does not mean acting rashly. It is about consciously choosing what really needs to be done instead of what must be done!

In this book, we explore how to once again give our heart the place it deserves and to become human again. In the previous pages, you could note the difference between living from the heart and the head and the consequences of this. In chapter 2, we dive into the essence of Heart over Head. We use the heart as a metaphor, exploring the four core chambers of the heart: gratitude, authenticity, compassion, and freedom. In chapter 3, you will discover the keys to opening the heart, and in chapter 4, how self-love is the foundation of this process.

I hope this book will inspire you to take steps towards a freer, more conscious, and happier life — a life led from the heart, while also giving your head its rightful place again. So that you become human again. That is my heartfelt wish for you.