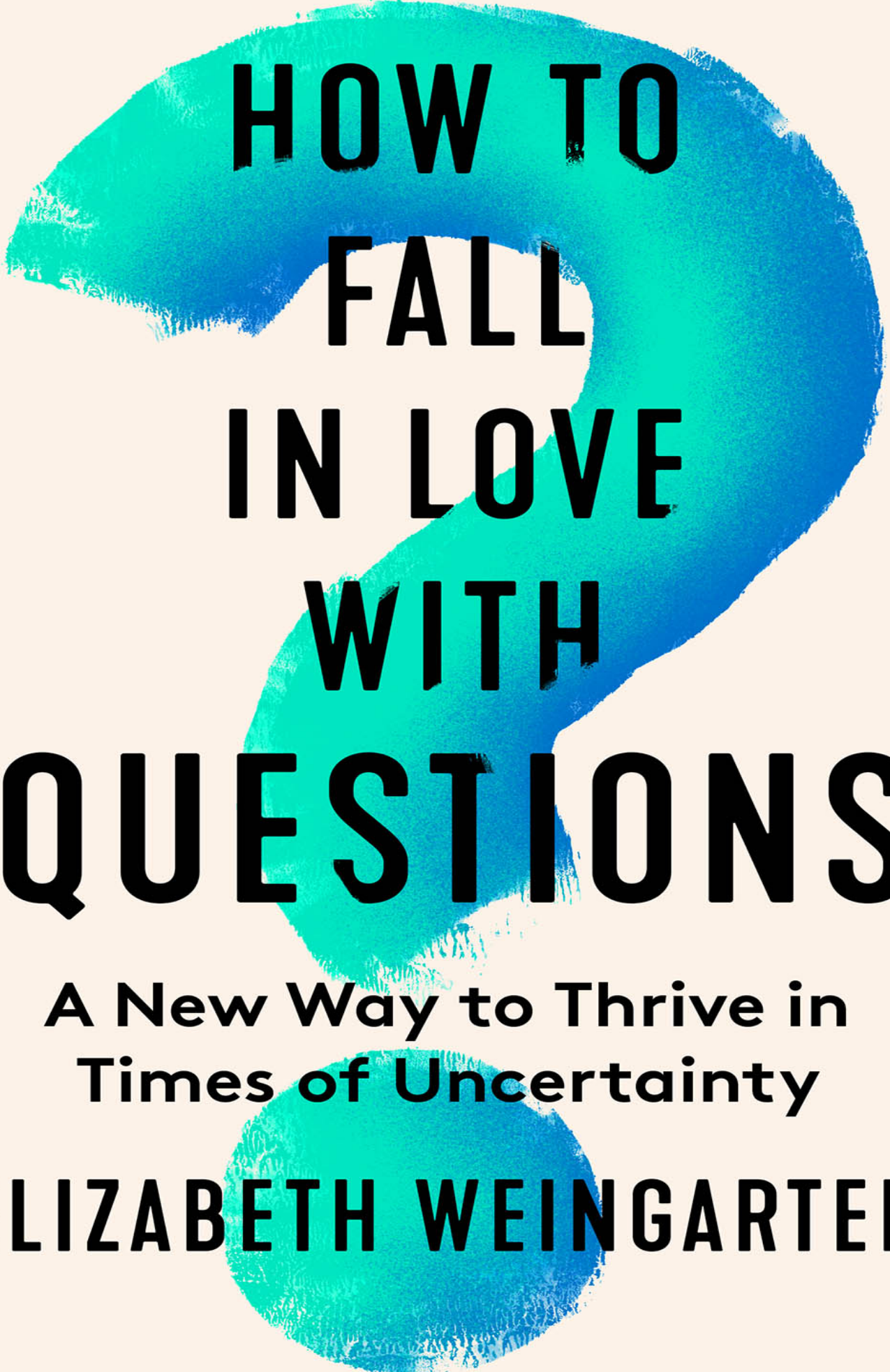




HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH QUESTIONS

**A New Way to Thrive in
Times of Uncertainty**

ELIZABETH WEINGARTEN

HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH QUESTIONS

**A NEW WAY TO THRIVE IN TIMES
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Dedication

*To my mom, dad, husband, and son—
my love for all of you is never in question.*

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Introduction

It was one of those nights I barely slept. Lying in bed in late June, next to my oblivious husband, I felt my heart pounding in my ears, my chest tight with anxiety.

If I did manage to sleep briefly, it was not the kind of sleep that helps you sort through a potentially disastrous life decision. It was certainly not the kind that people talk about when they tell you to “sleep on it.”

But I didn’t need to sleep on this decision, or at least I didn’t think so. For months, I’d been feeling barbs of doubt and uncertainty—at first, only during certain moments. Eventually, I couldn’t stop thinking about them: These questions that wouldn’t leave me alone. The decision materializing before me that I knew could blow up my life. The decision I needed to make, because not knowing what to do, and floundering in that feeling, felt much worse than just doing something.

By that June night, my body was sending me a clear signal: Enough uncertainty. Enough doubt. Answer the question and do what you have to do.

That morning, as my husband rolled out of bed to make coffee, I slumped over to the couch and told him, tearily, that we needed to talk. As he sat down next to me with his steaming mug, a concerned look on his face, I told him that I’d been asking myself a question in the months since we’d gotten married, and I finally knew the answer. The question: Should we get a divorce?

* * *

This is not a book about marriage. It's a book about uncertainty. It is the book I would have liked to read when I was poised to detonate my relationship or at various other points in my life when I wrestled with huge existential questions and had no answers.

Often, during those moments, I would pick up books or listen to podcasts, seeking refuge in the latest self-help, pop-psychology, or New Age spiritual book to feel less alone or to find answers that might help me through a rough patch. Invariably, predictably, within those pages, I would encounter this phrase: *Embrace uncertainty*.

Typically, when this nostrum pops up in books, TED Talks, or magazine articles, it is meant to be a solution, a call to action for those of us who do not feel like nuzzling up to the uncertainty in our lives and giving it a big bear hug. If we could just embrace uncertainty, these advice gurus assure us—if we could let it settle in, bake it cookies, and invite it to stay a while—then we'd eventually banish our psychological demons.

But these gurus are missing the point. If we could embrace uncertainty, in all aspects of our lives, we'd also be a different species. We humans are programmed to try to dispel doubt and uncertainty, to seek the comforting bedrock of certitude.

This book is not about banishing uncertainty; it's about finding a different and healthier relationship with it, whether or not you want to embrace it. This book is also about the unexpected and often painful consequences we encounter when we try to rid ourselves of doubt by seeking fast, easy answers to some of our biggest questions.

The idea for this book emerged from my own humbling, messy journey to change my relationship with uncertainty during a tumultuous period of my life. It is a journey you'll witness throughout these pages, and one that continues today.

Maybe the phrase “embrace uncertainty” makes you, too, cringe, and yet you're struggling with big unanswered questions in your own life. Maybe you're asking yourself: Did I choose the right life partner? Who do I want to be? Will I ever live without pain? How am I going to survive the loss of a loved one? What is my purpose?

Welcome. You've come to the right place. We're in this together.

And there are countless others in this with you, too, many of whom will appear in the pages of this book. Some of them are public figures. You may not have heard of some others discussed here, but their stories will prove instructive: a wedding photographer who falls out of love with her fiancé; a woman paralyzed in a car accident rediscovering her identity; a professor with a mysterious illness who devotes her life to studying how to live better

in uncertainty; an undocumented immigrant breaking free of questions that had been holding him back; a poet whose words more than a century ago give us a blueprint for living with our most challenging questions; and many, many others. For me, their stories are like fireflies, flickering during moments when I start to wonder whether anyone out there has ever felt what I'm feeling—whether anyone else understands. I hope that, after you read about the experiences of all these people, you'll know that they do understand what you're feeling. And so do I.

Unraveling Uncertainty

We use the term “uncertainty” all the time to talk about distinct life experiences—everything from waiting for a test result to wondering whether we've chosen the right partner. As a result, there are many ways to define the term. One early attempt by an economist in 1921 describes it as “the lack of knowledge about the probabilities of the future state of events.”¹ Though undoubtedly accurate, this definition doesn't capture much about the *experience* of being uncertain. Perhaps that's why the definition that resonates most with me is that of psychologists Raanan Lipshitz and Orna Strauss in their 1997 paper about how decision-makers conceptualize and cope with uncertainty. In their words, uncertainty is “a sense of doubt that blocks or delays action.”² Uncertainty, in other words, can freeze us in our tracks, leaving us to languish or stagnate. It can also impair our ability to make rational decisions. When we're faced with time pressure and uncertainty,³ research suggests we tend to *exploit* options that are familiar to us rather than *exploring* new choices, even though the best choice is generally to alternate between exploiting what's familiar and exploring what's new.⁴

We relate to uncertainty the way we relate to ambiguity: not very well. Most humans, in fact, are programmed with ambiguity bias.⁵ According to behavioral science research, most of us will do almost anything to avoid uncertainty, even if it means accepting greater risk or larger losses. Psychologists have named our tendency to want to resolve uncertainty “the need for closure”; this need applies to everyone, and it can change across situations.⁶

The need for closure can also change over time. Our intolerance for uncertainty appears to be growing.⁷ One group of researchers has shown through a meta-analysis—a study of fifty-two different studies—that this

trend is correlated to increased internet and mobile phone usage. Even though it might seem that having a device that can offer us answers at any moment would reduce anxiety, these researchers found that it paradoxically appears to have done the opposite for many people over the long term. We use our phones to seek reassurance and to feel safe when we're faced with an unpredictable experience: For instance, if we don't know which restaurant to go to in a new city, we can review Yelp ratings. In a moment of interpersonal awkwardness or while waiting in line, we can scroll through social media. As these behaviors harden into habit—*experience uncertainty, reach for phone*—we start to reduce our “spontaneous, everyday exposures to uncertainty,”⁸ the kind that could make us more resilient to, and tolerant of, the unknown. Unsurprisingly, anxiety is also on the rise,⁹ along with the myriad physical ailments that come along with it.¹⁰

In some contexts, of course, our desire to reduce uncertainty wanes or disappears altogether. We may even hunger for uncertainty, especially if we know it will eventually be resolved. Think, for instance, of sports or other competitive events. We'd find watching less exciting if we knew the outcome ahead of time. Even in our professional lives, a dollop of uncertainty—for instance, not knowing whether a new experiment will work—can be invigorating. And judging by the true crime obsession that pervades Netflix, books, and podcasts, many of us love a good unsolved mystery, unless that mystery is playing out in the context of our own lives. In that case, we often want to turn to the final chapter, or click to the final episode, to see how everything comes together at the end.

The Consequences of Pursuing Certainty

Our instincts to reduce uncertainty don't always serve us well. Instead, the obsession with pursuing what's known at all costs can make us vulnerable to industries designed to serve up fast, easy answers.

We pay big money to astrologists, life coaches, spiritual gurus, mediums, and other consultants to give us answers to Big Life Questions: where we should work, whom we should love, how we should spend our time. Research suggests that belief in astrology as a science is on the rise.¹¹ Burned out from online dating, more people are turning to matchmakers,¹² fueling demand for their services and inspiring new businesses.¹³ And the coaching

industry is growing fast, too—the number of coaching practitioners in 2019 was up 33 percent from 2015 estimates, according to a study from the International Coaching Federation.¹⁴

The need to seek answers is drilled into us by teachers and other caregivers from childhood. This encouragement isn't necessarily bad, particularly when the source is dispensing sound, evidence-based advice or when people help you uncover answers within yourself (as great coaches and therapists are trained to do). The problem is sometimes the people we turn to don't have our best interests at heart. They know how to present just the right mix of sagacity and snake oil to hook even the most clear-eyed consumer. Our human desire for quick answers leads us to seek them in the wrong place, at the wrong time, from the wrong people.

But what are we supposed to do *instead of* seeking comfort in answers? This was a question I began to confront in my early thirties, at a point during the COVID-19 pandemic when the global mood was taking a more optimistic turn. In the US, the Food and Drug Administration had approved a vaccine, and people were tentatively booking flights or thinking about venturing out to play a game of trivia in a boisterous bar or to attend a concert indoors.

I, on the other hand, braced for impending doom. I couldn't shake a persistent and pernicious sense that I had just made two ruinous life decisions.

The first was to leave my job without having another one lined up. The second was to marry my boyfriend, now my husband.

These decisions, though exciting at the time, resolved nothing and only raised more questions: What did I want to do with my life? Would I ever find another job? Did I marry the right person? If I did, why was I so miserable?

And I *loathed* those questions—a strange experience for someone who claimed that inquiry was a scholarly passion.

My intellectual relationship with questions was easy. As an applied behavioral scientist and journalist, I'd spent years researching and writing about the power of questions in our personal and professional lives.¹⁵ Questions, as an abstract subject of my work, were a convenient distraction, tucked inside a drawer of my mind I could open or slam shut as I pleased.

This was not the case for the queries that surfaced in my dreams, that nudged the dial of my heart rate, that were threaded through my every thought. These questions were my tormentors. I wanted answers—and I wanted them now. *How can I find a meaningful career? What's my purpose? Should I get a divorce?*

On a walk around my neighborhood in downtown Oakland, California, one evening, peering at the crepuscular pink sky and stuck in a raincloud of

rumination, I heard a podcast extolling the wisdom of a poet named Rainer Maria Rilke and his book *Letters to a Young Poet*.¹⁶ It sounded like a salve for anyone who was struggling with big questions.

The Third Letter

Let's travel back in time for a moment, to 1903. Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet, was broke. Even worse, he worried that he had run out of ideas. At twenty-seven, he had already written more than a dozen books, though he had little traditional "success" to show for them. Penniless in Paris, the poet received a letter in February 1903.¹⁷ It sparked a correspondence that would later influence the lives of thousands around the world,¹⁸ including such varied figures as Marilyn Monroe, Konrad Zuse (the inventor of the programmable computer), Dustin Hoffman, and Lady Gaga.

The writer of this crucial letter, Franz Kappus, was a nineteen-year-old enrolled in a military academy, an aspiring poet, and a fanboy of sorts. Kappus was asking the older poet to help him navigate the mounting uncertainty of life.¹⁹ In his third missive, the religiously conservative Kappus interrogated Rilke about whether sexual love was a sin, asking forbearance if he had rambled. He concluded, "I only wanted to share just one of the many questions leading their lonely existence in my soul."²⁰

What's unusual about Rilke's response, and what has made it so enduring all these years later, is that he did not suggest that he had answers, nor that Kappus should seek them out. Instead, Rilke wrote, "I want to ask you, dear sir, as best I can, to have patience about everything that is still unresolved in your heart; try to love *the questions themselves*, like locked rooms, like books written in a truly foreign language. Don't look for the answers now: they cannot be given to you yet because you cannot yet live them, and what matters is to live everything. For now, *live the questions*. If you do, then maybe, gradually, without your realizing it, some far-off day you will live your way into the answer."²¹

Rilke was not explicit about what he meant by living the questions, but I've come to define his response as a strategy to break through the paralysis of uncertainty. It's a method of truth-seeking that is less interested in a final answer and more in the search for it, in what we can find along the way. Characterized by patience and openness to new ideas, those who live the questions crave the experience of continuous discovery, rather than a specific outcome. In his letter, Rilke converted what we might think of as

wallowing—the static discomfort of being unsure—into authoritative action. He imbued the act of patiently holding a question with a sense of momentum, vibrancy, and vitality.

These lines—“try to love the questions themselves,” “live the questions”—felt familiar and foreign to me at the same time. They comforted and challenged me. They piqued my curiosity because *loving* the questions felt decidedly different from *embracing uncertainty*. The idea of embracing uncertainty not only felt impossible to me, as I considered the potential dissolution of my marriage and my future career; it also seemed out of reach for so many other people dealing with their own uncertain experiences. Consider someone waiting to hear whether their cancer has come back, someone uncertain about the results of genetic testing on their unborn baby, someone not sure they’ll walk again after an accident. “Embrace uncertainty” is the mother of all platitudes.

Rilke’s emphasis on love, however, felt more realistic, more attainable. Love, after all, is hard work. It’s often painful. In some situations, the object of your desire may act in ways that feel insensitive, aloof, or uncaring. They may seem unrecognizable from the person you fell for. In those moments, part of loving them is to be curious about *why* they’re acting that way and to listen to their response even when you’d rather throw up your hands.

Embedded in this method of living is a recognition that it isn’t always easy, that you may not want to love your questions, though you still must live with and commit to them. By continually returning to your biggest questions about relationships, meaning, purpose, and identity, you keep an important set of conversations alive: conversations with yourself, with those around you, and with the world.

But let’s come back to earth for a moment. This was a nice idea, in theory. Still, I wondered: Is it really possible to love the questions of our lives—particularly the most painful and significant ones? What does a life of living the questions look and feel like? And what can we all learn from the people and communities following this path?

Throughout these pages, you’ll meet many others who have taken a radically different approach to how they commune with uncertainty. And here, I’ll offer an important caveat. Many authors have defined frameworks and offered up methods to guide readers toward decisions with resolve. But in this book I suggest that we should hold answers at bay—at least for the most significant questions in our lives, and at least for a little while. In the spirit of Rilke, we can learn to avoid the addictive appeal of fast, easy answers. Loving the questions is a practice that’s seldom pursued, challenging to sustain, and utterly transformational.

Defining “The Questions”

There’s probably a question nagging at you right now: What questions are we talking about here? The field of possible questions to love is vast. How do we distinguish among questions as varied as “Should I date this person?,” “How can I be happier?,” “Where should I live?,” and “Who am I becoming?”

Throughout this book, I’ll encourage us to think about all of the questions in our life like parts of a fruit tree.

PEACHES: Some questions are like fruit that ripens and can eventually be picked. These questions fall into the *answerable* category. There are *short-term answerable* questions; think about these as fruit that ripens relatively quickly, like a peach. These are the questions that, over a short period of time, get resolved—questions like “Will I get the job?”

PAWPAWS: It takes a pawpaw tree five to seven years to grow its tangy, yellowish-green fruit.²² These, then, represent *long-term answerable* questions. Pawpaw questions eventually bear the fruit of an answer, but the time horizons are longer. For instance, you might question whether you should stay in a relationship, whether a new fertility treatment will help you get pregnant, or whether you’ll end up liking a career change.

HEARTWOOD: Other questions are more like the inner wood of the tree.²³ The purpose of heartwood is to help the tree with balance, stability, and security. Heartwood questions are the ones that stay with you throughout your life. Though they’re fundamentally unanswerable in a permanent way, they are your lifelong companions, helping you return to a sense of equilibrium. Think about questions like “Who am I?” and “How do I live a life of meaning and purpose?”

DEAD LEAVES: Finally, there are questions that do not ripen into answers and that we do not want to carry with us. These are the questions we eventually need to release. They no longer nourish us and are often questions about past decisions that drive patterns of rumination and suffering. These might be questions that emerge from regrets, about why relationships ended, about wanting closure that won’t come: “Why didn’t I just take that job?” “Why did we break up?” “What if I had just done it all differently?” If a question isn’t helping you grow and move forward, it’s time to let it go.

What to Expect Next

This book unfolds in three parts, each designed to make concrete a piece of Rilke's philosophical wisdom and to help us learn as much from the poet's story as we do from his words.

Part One, "Don't Look for the Answers Now: How the Search for Easy Answers Fails Us," looks at why we crave certainty, how our current culture has exacerbated this desire, and how the tendency debilitates our minds, our bodies, and our societies.

In Part Two, "Love the Questions Themselves: The Rewards of Committing to Curiosity," we learn about the many benefits of living in questions, and we trace the stories of people whose lives were transformed when they changed their relationship with uncertainty.

Part Three, "Live the Questions: Starting a Questions Practice," offers ways to begin living in questions yourself: evidence-backed tools to develop your own questions practice and a questions map to help you navigate your own uncertainty. You'll find inspiration for different questions to ask yourself and ways to approach what might seem like a mysterious pursuit: *live the questions now, and love the questions themselves.*

The pursuit seemed mysterious to *me*, at least. As I faced my own questions about my relationship, my job, my *life*, I felt a desire for two things: Yes, I wanted answers. Increasingly, though, I was also curious about whether I could live up to Rilke's ideal, learning to cherish the questions that were keeping me stuck. It seemed to me that if I *could* manage to love them—or even just hate them a little less—that maybe I'd feel better, less anxious and afraid. Maybe I'd feel less hungry for answers. And maybe the practice would unlock some deeper wisdom about how to live a more fulfilling, purposeful life.

Or . . . maybe it would teach me something else entirely. I'd tried almost everything else: What did I have to lose? It would, I decided, be a kind of philosophical experiment.

I hope my experiment will show you new ways of relating to uncertainty, using it to propel yourself toward self-growth and discovery, instead of staying painfully stuck. With deeper awareness of the questions you carry, I hope you'll also learn to distinguish between the ones you wish to keep permanently in your pocket and the ones that, eventually, you decide to let go.

Perhaps your questions will morph into new shapes and encourage the sort of self-discovery that's only possible when you feel most alive—that is,

when you're open to all the possibilities of what could happen next.

Part One

Don't Look for the Answers Now

How the Search for Easy Answers Fails

Us

The Charlatans of Certainty

The Big Idea

Why are we so often seduced by fast, easy “answers” to our most significant questions? Though the reasons are complex and individual, this seduction is primarily driven by “gurus” who don’t have our best interests at heart.

Rainer Maria Rilke is twenty-one and has no idea what to do with his life or even how to live it. What he knows is that he has a crush on a woman he’s never met—someone he fell for after reading her writing. For weeks, he sends her a series of unsigned poems. Then he asks his friend Jakob Wassermann to introduce him to the woman. So Wassermann arranges for the two to meet at his apartment in Munich for tea.

The woman arrives, wearing a loose, cottony dress, with her wavy brown hair in a messy top bun. She tells stories unconventionally, with events out of order. Rilke is mesmerized. The woman is Lou Andreas-Salomé, a Russian feminist, writer, philosopher, and psychotherapist. She has

already declined marriage proposals from Frederick Nietzsche and the philosopher Paul Rée.

First Rilke and Andreas-Salomé become lovers—and then something else. Rilke is obsessed with Andreas-Salomé; she’s more skeptical. But she believes Rilke can be molded, groomed, improved. And Rilke is desperate to be shaped—for someone to tell him how to be, what to do, how to live.¹

“I am still soft, I can be like wax in your hands,” he writes in an autobiographical story after meeting Andreas-Salomé. “Take me, give me a form, finish me.”²

“You’ve been having some problems with your boyfriend, haven’t you?” the astrologer asked me over the phone—a raspy, unfamiliar voice in my earbuds.

Well. How to answer such a question?

I paused, remembering our fight the previous day. The unresolved tension polluted our living room, where I was taking this call now.

It wasn’t that the fighting was new; our relationship had been challenging for years. I’d almost broken up with my now-husband, then-boyfriend, twice. We were different in significant ways. He’d grown up in a lower-middle-class family in Central California; I’d grown up upper middle class in the suburbs of Chicago. He was part Lebanese, and his parents raised him Catholic. I was Jewish. We’d both experienced childhood traumas, making us more sensitive and reactive in certain contexts. We often behaved in ways that triggered each other, creating what could feel like a never-ending cycle of fighting and hurt.

It hadn’t always been that way. We’d met on an online dating app back in the spring of 2016. What I noticed first about his dating profile—which the algorithms served up during my first week in San Francisco, where I’d moved from Washington, DC—was that “A.” was an English teacher. This seemed like a refreshingly different occupation in San Francisco, the tech bro capital. On our first date, we met at a bar in the Mission District known for its free peanuts. Shells littered the sticky floor. The bartender overfilled the drinks, and I accidentally spilled some of my dirty martini on this date of mine. I was reminded of the time I’d dropped a slice of pizza—cheese side down—onto the sleek silk dress pants of a DC date. (“Jesus, are you kidding me?” that guy, a lawyer, had hissed, dabbing his grease-stained crotch while

I looked on in horror.) But A. just laughed. At the end of the evening, he asked if it would be okay to kiss me. It was, and he did—politely and passionately.

On our second date, we spent nine hours walking through the city, looping our way from the eucalyptus-lined paths of Lands End through the foggy Richmond District. On the fourth date, we went to a Prince-themed dance party, and he looked at me with so much tenderness as we swayed to “Purple Rain” that I thought I would explode. Sure, part of this was lust—the honeymoon phase of a new relationship. But something else drew me to him.

A., unlike other men I’d dated, asked me questions and listened closely to my answers. Also unlike other men I’d dated, he was curious not just about the polished, finely tuned version of me I presented to him, which I was accustomed to serving up. He wanted to know about who I was underneath all of that—a question I didn’t yet have an answer to. This subterranean part was a version of me that was raw, ragged, unpredictable, angry. This version felt trapped by expectations about the way I was supposed to behave to keep my reputation and relationships intact.

A. didn’t have the same kinds of expectations. In a way that was often uncanny, he could tell when I was saying something just to placate him or doing something because I thought I was *supposed* to. *This* was what upset him most. He expected me to behave not flawlessly, but honestly—even when it meant revealing thoughts and behaviors that felt ugly and unknown to me. Rather than turning away from these parts, he leaned in, wanting to know more and to understand dimensions of me I didn’t yet understand myself.

For a few months, I was convinced he was the man I was supposed to marry. This, after all, *felt different*. And wasn’t it supposed to feel different when you *just knew*?

But my doubts started creeping in at a close friend’s wedding, the first one we attended together a few months after we began dating. At the intimate rehearsal dinner, most people were having a drink or two, if that. A., on the other hand, had decided to go not just a little harder than everyone else, but a lot. He had close to eight drinks before I pulled him aside at the bar. “What are you doing?” I hissed. He was sloppy, almost falling over. Furious, I dragged A. back to our hotel, wondering why he’d behaved this way when he was meeting some of my best friends for the first time. He was thirty years old, confident, and brilliant. What was wrong with him? Where was the empathetic, funny, and measured guy I couldn’t wait to spend time with?

As I introduced him to other friends, the pattern repeated itself. He would drink too much or he would start a conflict—challenging someone’s