

Why I'm Writing *The Aliveness Project*

For years, I have sat with families living through Alzheimer's disease.

I watched spouses become caregivers.

Adult children become decision-makers.

Families learn new vocabularies almost overnight—memory care, powers of attorney, long-term care, hospice.

Then, as a financial advisor, I watched people navigate other enormous transitions: retirement, illness, death, inheritance, caregiving, the end of careers they had spent decades building.

We talk a great deal about how to prepare for those transitions.

Financially.

Legally.

Medically.

Practically.

But there is another question we don't talk about nearly enough:

Who are you when the role that has organized your life disappears?

That question became one beginning of *The Aliveness Project*.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized this isn't only a caregiving question.

It is an aging question.

And, especially, a question about women.

For generations, our culture has carried an odd assumption that a woman reaches a certain age and begins a gradual retreat from the center of her own life.

She is supposed to become quieter.

Less visible.

Less sensual.

Less ambitious.

Less curious.

Less interested in being surprised.

Useful, certainly. Pleasant, preferably. Available to everyone else.

But somehow no longer expected to be expanding.

I don't believe that.

One of my favorite lines in the novel came when two characters in their seventies look at Nora as though she has said something completely ridiculous and ask:

“Good Lord, Nora, do you think we just turn into furniture at seventy-three?”

Exactly.

Why have we been so willing to accept the idea that aging should mean becoming increasingly decorative and increasingly still?

What if this stage of life can be expansive instead?

When Responsibility Becomes Identity

Caregiving rarely arrives all at once.

At first, you help.

You make a phone call.

Drive to an appointment.

Pick up groceries.

Handle a bill.

Then another responsibility appears.

And another.

Eventually, entire parts of your life begin rearranging themselves around another person's needs.

Sometimes that lasts for years.

You love the person.

You want to help.

You may even consider the opportunity to care for them a privilege.

And it can still cost you something.

Those truths can exist together.

One of the things I've learned from watching caregivers is how quietly responsibility can consume identity.

The question stops being:

What do I want today?

It becomes:

What needs to be done?

For a while, that question may be necessary.

The danger comes when we get so good at answering it that we forget there was ever another one.

Then caregiving ends.

Or the children leave home.

Or retirement arrives.

Or a marriage ends.

Or the career that supplied our title, schedule and usefulness is suddenly over.

Everyone expects relief.

Instead, sometimes there is an enormous blank space.

Not simply:

What should I do now?

Something harder:

Who am I now?

We Are Very Good at Rewarding Usefulness

Our culture loves productive people.

We admire the ones who show up.

Solve problems.

Earn money.

Raise families.

Care for parents.

Volunteer.

Lead committees.

Keep everything moving.

There is nothing wrong with usefulness.

I have spent much of my own life being useful, and I'm proud of a great deal of it.

But usefulness makes a dangerous substitute for identity.

If I know myself primarily through what I produce, who am I when I stop producing it?

If everyone knows me as the caregiver, what happens when there is nobody left to care for?

If my value has come from being needed, what happens when nobody urgently needs me anymore?

We often call that freedom.

But freedom can be surprisingly disorienting when you've forgotten what you wanted to do with it.

This Is Bigger Than Caregiving

Caregiving gave me one of the clearest windows into identity loss because I watched it happen so often and so gradually.

But we can disappear inside many roles.

Career.

Marriage.

Parenthood.

Responsibility.

Competence.

Being the one everybody can count on.

Even being "good" can become a role so carefully maintained that we stop asking whether it still contains the whole person.

And then there is age itself.

Somewhere around the second half of life, the world can begin speaking to us as though our most interesting chapters are behind us.

I am writing this book partly because I reject that premise.

I am interested in what happens when a woman who has spent years meeting expectations begins paying attention again to what makes her laugh, wonder, create, desire, connect and care deeply about being here.

Not because she has abandoned responsibility.

Because she has remembered that responsibility was never supposed to require her disappearance.

The novel gives me a way to explore a question I have been thinking about for years:

How do we find ourselves again without replacing one set of expectations with another?

That distinction matters to me.

I Don't Believe Reinvention Is Always the Answer

We love reinvention stories.

Quit the job.

Sell the house.

Move to Italy.

Open the bakery.

Become a completely new woman with fabulous scarves.

And sometimes that is exactly what someone needs.

But I don't think most of us need to blow up our lives in order to feel alive inside them.

Sometimes the life itself isn't the problem.

Sometimes we've simply stopped inhabiting it.

That is why I keep coming back to the idea of **invitation**.

An invitation doesn't demand transformation.

It creates an opening.

Try this.

Notice that.

Go somewhere you wouldn't normally go.

Say no once.

Ask a question.

Call someone.

Pay attention to what happens inside you.

Maybe aliveness returns not through one dramatic act of reinvention, but through a hundred small acts of attention.

The Body Remembers Too

Another part of this book matters deeply to me.

We often talk about identity as though it lives entirely in the mind.

It doesn't.

We experience ourselves through our bodies too.

Through movement.

Touch.

Clothing.

Food.

Music.

Sexuality.

Rest.

Pleasure.

Exhaustion.

The way we occupy a room.

Years of responsibility can train us to treat the body almost like another piece of equipment that needs maintenance.

Feed it.

Medicate it.

Get it to bed.

Keep going.

But the body carries information.

Sometimes it knows we are unhappy before we admit it.

Sometimes it knows what delights us before we can explain why.

Sometimes feeling alive begins with something as small as noticing sensation again.

Not becoming younger.

Becoming present.

Those are very different things.

Companions Matter

The longer I've lived, the more convinced I am that becoming ourselves is rarely a solitary project.

We need other people.

Not necessarily enormous circles of them.

But people who help us see.

People who make room.

People who challenge assumptions.

People who remind us who we were before a difficult season consumed us.

And sometimes people who introduce us to a version of ourselves we haven't met yet.

That's why companionship became one of the major threads running through *The Aliveness Project*.

Not rescue.

Companionship.

There is a difference.

Nobody else can hand us our identity.

But the right people can stand beside us while we recover it.

Aliveness Is Not Self-Indulgence

This is where I think some people become uncomfortable.

When you've spent years caring for others, working, producing, keeping a family moving, or simply being the reliable one, turning attention toward yourself can feel selfish.

What do **I** want?

What makes **me** feel alive?

What would **I** choose?

Those questions can sound almost indecent after years of responding to someone else's needs.

But I don't think aliveness is the same thing as self-indulgence.

Quite the opposite.

People who feel connected to their own lives often have more to give.

More creativity.

More curiosity.

More energy.

More generosity.

More capacity to notice other people.

The goal isn't to become the center of the universe.

It is to stop disappearing from your own life.

What Do We Inherit?

Increasingly, I think *The Aliveness Project* is also about inheritance in a much larger sense.

We inherit money.

Objects.

Recipes.

Photographs.

Stories.

Habits.

Fears.

Ways of loving.

Ways of avoiding.

Ideas about what women should do.

What aging should look like.

How much of ourselves we are permitted to take up.

And perhaps, if we're lucky, we inherit questions.

Questions that continue working on us long after the people who shaped us are gone.

Questions that make us curious about ourselves again.

Why I'm Writing It

I am writing *The Aliveness Project* because I have seen what happens when responsibility consumes enormous portions of a person's life.

But I am also writing it because I am increasingly fascinated by what can happen in the decades after the world begins assuming we should become less interesting.

I have also seen what can happen afterward.

Some people become angry.

Some remain exhausted long after the emergency is over.

Some quietly disappear into the background.

And some begin asking questions they haven't had time to ask in years.

What do I like?

Who do I want around me?

What have I postponed?

What still makes me curious?

What makes me feel awake?

Who was I before everyone needed something from me?

What if I am not winding down at all?

And maybe the most important one:

Who might I still become?

I don't think the answer requires becoming an entirely different person.

Sometimes it is less about reinvention than reclamation.

Recovering the curiosity.

The creativity.

The relationships.

The humor.

The body.

The sense of purpose.

The parts of ourselves that were never actually gone.

They were simply waiting beneath everything that needed to be done.

That is the project.

Not desperately trying to become young again.

Not constructing a brand-new life simply for the drama of it.

And certainly not turning quietly into furniture.

Learning how to inhabit the life that is still here.

Fully.

Intentionally.

Alive.