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**The Art of Living Bright:**  
*A Path to Empowerment in Your Own Life*

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# Preface: A Brave Foot Forward

LIFE ISN'T FOR SISSIES

There are so many forms of art: culinary art, visual and performing art, language and communication arts, the art of being a good lover, parent, or colleague...The list is near endless. Of all the art forms that exist, the art of living is the biggest, the most important and the most challenging of all. Art is not something you can master—if you could, it wouldn't be called an art. In the art of living, there is no right or wrong answer. There is neither a beginning nor an end. Nor is there a final word. It is the kind of monumental topic that really makes us think. People and characters from all walks of life, from Socrates to Charlie Brown, have spent entire lifetimes digging into it. All of us as human beings must face the challenge, which sometimes resembles *Mission Impossible* and at other times feels like a breeze.

The fact is that we very rarely grasp what the art of living daily life fundamentally consists of. Our awareness of it only occurs when we stop to reflect, and it is in this regard that the book you hold in your hands can open new doors to life.

For me, the art of living is about being the artist of your own life. An artist in the sense of being able to set yourself free—completely free—to see life's creative potential and claim the opportunities that present themselves. The artist's approach to life embodies an ease, openness, honesty, sensitivity and curiosity. The artist takes the initiative to create and is in the process of creating true to his or her values and goals. Every day we have the possibility to take one or more steps toward what we want, or in building and expanding upon what we already have. We have the freedom and choice of where and how we will take each step.

But do we need to take a couple of strides or many? Should the step be big or small? Should the footprint we leave be heavy or light? And, most important: How do we take steps that create the most pleasure and lead us to the greatest wellbeing? All of these questions are part of what this guide is all about. The art of living is based on the freedom to act, but it requires courage and accountability. The challenge is to take steps to realize our visions and dreams without stepping on others and without sacrificing life's gifts and variations. The art of living is very much about respect for other people, communities, life and the world in which we all live.

The art of living cannot be defined. The subjective interpretation of what constitutes it is always up for grabs. Yet there is something—a lot even—that resonates for most of us. I want this book to introduce an approach to living that addresses the most important aspects of life, the ones that mean a great deal for all of us from the time we are born until we bow out. Based on this new method, I describe how we can thrive as professionals and in our personal lives. Human wellbeing is the thread that runs throughout this book. I don't talk about stress and stress management, but wellbeing. It is not about the treatment of pathologies, but about health. Even today's major lifestyle diseases such as burnout and depression, I aim to counterbalance by talking about wellbeing. There are many, many benefits that can come from talking about wellbeing.

This guide is divided into two parts. In the first section, I introduce the sphere in which the art of living takes place and describe its key concepts and mechanisms. I offer a model of wellbeing and look at what it is to download delight, desire and energy from work. I will give input into what it means to be in balance, and why imbalance also has a place in life. Without imbalances there would not be, for example, an object like a peace pipe or an activity called make-up sex. In the second part, I dig several layers deep in eleven of the major elements of life: courage and responsibility; being; meaning; joy; love and intimacy; engagement; desire and interest; vitality and stamina; resources; actions and goals; as well as faith and hope. It is not

my intention to give an exhaustive, encyclopedic description of what the art of living is—it can hardly be reduced to a book a few centimeters thick. Instead I try to cultivate a concise, disciplined overview centered on individuals, you and me. It's your art of living and that distinction matters, because the artist in your life is you. It is of course not unwise or illegal to take inspiration from a fellow human. What works for others may be relevant for one's self. I have therefore included examples and case studies from real life, some of which are taken from my private clinical practice. I also leave my personal drawer ajar. My wish and hope is that the book you are reading right now may be a source of inspiration for the art of creating even more joy, balance and development in your life.

The art of living is as big as the sky. It is a never-ending, lifelong process. Some may prefer to talk about self-development and self-realization. But the art of living is much more than just that. The art of living is a process for each of us but it can also be a process that takes place in a family, in the workplace, in a (sub)culture or an entire nation. The art of living is played out here and now and can be influenced by future standards and zeitgeists. I would like to raise the question of whether we are doing something wrong in the way we live life? Could we organize ourselves in ways that would bring even greater joy and wellbeing, less stress, less depression and enable ourselves to lead healthier lives? I think there 's a lot we could do differently to improve our lives; although it is not always the same thing that each of us needs to do. In many cases, we need to do something together to gain a common joy, wellbeing and health. That's why I paint a picture of the art of living with big brushstrokes.

I like to think as broadly as possible about the art of living, and I also believe that many other people do as well. When a sweet and well-intentioned colleague heard that I was writing a book on the topic, she exclaimed, "How could you dare!" Her eyes were about to pop out of her head. I saw her response as an involuntary reaction about the project being too bold, too foolhardy. She was obviously spot on in that it takes courage to address a grand, limitless topic

such as happiness, pleasure and the art of living. But in my view, it requires more than courage. I believe it is foolhardy not to, since we must all relate to what the art of living means for us personally and where and how we choose to take our life's steps, one after the other. So, perhaps we might want to call it something else instead. We could call it "living well" or "the good life," "getting the most out of life" or "reaching our potential." We might want to use a more clinical term like "quality of life." None are wrong. But none truly embraces what the art of living is about.

My colleague's astonishment was really a spark for me and, after contemplating her reaction I have come to see myself as neither particularly brave nor foolhardy. I find that my interest in the art of living equates to a healthy appetite for life spiced with a good dose of curiosity. It's no secret that my inspiration for most of the issues I address in this book comes from the many conversations I've had with patients and clients over time. I owe these people, my family, my friends and many others a big thank you for their inspiration and all that they have given me. When I parted with my colleague that day, there was only one question that buzzed around restlessly: "How could I not?"

It is in reality a question that has taken me far. It prompted me to sell my medical clinic to immerse myself in sexology and write my first book, *The Prescription for Happiness (Recepten for lykke)*. It is also an issue that led me to becoming the father of a lovable daughter Ella, and to have a flourishing family. "How could we not?" is a question I like and often pose to others. Life offers no guarantees. In many people's ears, the safe choice sounds like a good recipe for living. For our parents, girlfriends, employers and many others it may be easier to support us in making seemingly safe choices rather than ones that seem less certain. The reality is that safe choices easily lead to boredom and a life in limbo. There is obviously balance in everything. Risk-taking is not a definitive recipe for living. Also, saying "no" may just as easily bring more happiness, wellbeing and health. The trick is to make the right choices and rejections. Today

we can do so much, but what do we really want? Since you can do just about anything, what is it that you want to do? In continuing this important topic, I issue an invitation. Unexpected invitations have unique potential, and this one is an opportunity to explore, develop and cultivate everything that makes up the art of your life.



# PART 1



## TURN ON THE LIGHT

This section describes the expanded sphere of the art of living and introduces it as a matter of life and death. The universal elements of the art of living i.e., areas of life that matter to everyone, are all contained within the sphere. Since our emotions represent the keys to life—both our personal and professional lives—emotions occupy an important place within it. The sphere also illustrates how we have the ability to choose wellbeing, joy, desire and vitality.

The stylized image of a dandelion going to seed, which you will see next to each of the exercises in the book, is a symbol of the notion that life is strong, fragile and so precious that it should be lived now. All life has its time, and this makes the art of living very important. Some readers might also associate the dandelion with transformation, or fertilization and dissemination of everything from genes to good ideas. The exercises you can do on the spot or save for later. If you choose to do the same exercise several times, you will probably find that your answers change. That natural variation and transformation is why the art of living is the mission of a lifetime—a mission that calls upon the entire sphere of the art of living and brings it together in different ways at different times.

# THE ART OF LIVING TO THE FULLEST

## The Art of Living to the Fullest

A MISSION FOR LIFE

The art of living—does it mean that we should strive for unattainable ideals? If this were the case, it would be a wasted undertaking. It would be unattainable by definition and never within the realm of possibility. The ideals of life would also easily shuttle us away from the art of living instead of carrying us deeper into it. This is especially true when ideals are not our own, or when they are impossible to achieve.

If the art of living required us to follow a fixed template, a script, and to adapt to the prevailing norms and rules of conduct, it wouldn't be anything more than a petty exercise and it wouldn't be worth the effort.

So what is the art of living? If the art of living is so hard to describe, why not just give up at the outset? Life energy is a precious and limited resource for all of us. Can't it be used for something more productive rather than dubious models about conducting life? Yes, but I use the term models, because when reality gets hard to pin down, these particular models do provide a glimmer of insight. Even if a model is always a simplification of reality, fragments of a reality can sometimes have such overwhelming complexity that it can take your breath away. Precisely for this reason, the sphere of the art of living that I formulate here can serve us well.

### Artists-in-Residence

We are each the resident artist in our own homes. It is not necessary to scurry around with brushes and palette and paint everything from the walls to the toilet seat. Though that might well be the case. The art of painting is an art, and it is an art to design an alluring

handbag or a Ferrari-red pen. To be a good lover, parent, friend and colleague also falls under the art of living as does language, music, the visual and performing arts and all other art forms that involve our senses. But of all the arts, living is the biggest, most important and challenging of all. The art of living is limitless. You will never be able to clap your hands and say, “Now it’s done, I’ve finished the project.” The art of living is a mission for life.

The sphere I see as our personal hodgepodge of everything that each of us associates with the art of living, so yours is different than mine. Still, there are elements that recur in most people’s lives. For example, we must show a minimum of courage and responsibility to live. We all have love for ourselves, for life and the life around us. Life is not only time. It also consists of actions, whether they are large or small. Life also consists of being, and the right balance between being and acting can be difficult to find. The second part of the book describes eleven elements within the sphere. While some of them will mean more to you than others, each one will have some degree of impact.

That is the way it goes for every one of us. Certain arts simply have more significance for us than others. For me, it’s important to write and spread uplifting messages about the benefits and health value of happiness, pleasure and the art of living. It is an activity that brings an elemental connection to life, because it is important to me to write. It is also an activity that overlaps with pleasure, desire, interest, profits and other elements of human life. In turn, the culinary arts are not an activity that I pursue, at least not when it comes to slinging pots and pans in the kitchen. I would rather do the dishes over a good glass of wine. As permanent artists-in-residence, me in my own sphere and you in yours, we each have dandelions to let go to seed and to root where we will.



*The sphere of the art of living, with its universal elements. At its core are joy, pleasure and desire, along with vitality. They are the inverse of the three core symptoms associated with depression. You will probably discover additional aspects that are important for you in your own inner sphere.*

### **Make Your Own Custom Frame**

As artist-in-residence, which aspects of the art of living mean so much to you that they deserve to be framed in your personal domain? It may be that communication, or inner peace and balance mean a lot to you. Dreams and spirituality might also have great significance. Or how about activities like gardening, charity work, exercise or music? These are all facets of the art of living for many people, but this list of suggestions is by no means exhaustive. Name at least three or four aspects that mean so much to you that they deserve to



be included in your personal sphere, which you'll find in the toolkit at the end of the book

### **Nothing Stands Still in the Sphere**

Things are always in flux. For example, desire or interest can run in the direction of work one moment and toward erotic intercourse the next. If everything stood still, there would be no variation, no development and probably no great happiness, pleasure or enjoyment. We can easily find happiness, pleasure and enjoyment without having to reinvent hedonism as a new, simplistic monistic theory. From my point of view, the art of living and theories such as happiness (e.g., Aristotle), power (Nietzsche) and striving to avoid anxiety (Freud) or avoiding displeasure and pain (Epicurus) are reductive and simplistic. They are also impossible to reconcile with one another. Throughout human history people have tried to explain why people act the way they do, but no monistic theory has been able to fully explain human actions. The complexity and the dynamics of the art of living are just too great.

Human beings need renewal. Change is good, but too many changes can also kill. Change is consequently a double-edged sword. Finding the balance between change that enlivens, and change that kills, is a very important feature of the art of living in this day and age. This is particularly true in situations where we are blinded by the rush of the happiness of change and are slow to discover that too much change favors dissatisfaction and disease. To describe this unpleasant and sometimes harmful form of failing to thrive, we say that we are stressed, depressed or burned out. Failing to thrive is frequently a call to bring life into balance.

### **Imbalances Are a Part of Life**

There is at the present moment tremendous focus on creating balance in life. The reason is that modern life is full of imbalances and

imbalances easily create emotional turmoil beyond our performance and productivity. Imbalances commonly occur in the relationship between work and private life. Many of us express that we are spending too many hours and far too much energy at work, so we end up having few hours to ourselves and no energy for our non-work-related activities. Some people experience imbalances in family relationships. It may be that attention is too heavily directed towards a child, a hobby or a beer bottle and that creates imbalances in family dynamics. At other times, imbalances in an intimate relationship occur where one partner has more erotic pleasure than another. Imbalances such as these are quite natural, but if they become too big, or if they go on for too long, it can cause problems.

The mission is not to create one-hundred-percent balance in all aspects of life. Such a goal is not only really hard work, and it can never be achieved overall. Imbalances are also potential opportunities. This becomes particularly evident in situations where recovery from an imbalance does not displace the anticipated happiness or wellbeing. By investing less of yourself at work, you may well come home with more energy, but you might also end up experiencing less job satisfaction. If we do everything possible to correct the pleasure imbalances in the relationship, then we run the risk of things getting boring. We lose the spark and things become stagnant and incommensurate with the notion of satisfying sex and cohabitation.

### **Our Sphere Reveals How We Want to Be**

If you chose to do the first exercise, then it will probably be clear that the three or four things you wrote for your own individual sphere reveal things that mean a lot to you. It is your personal signature on the art of living. At the same time, the elements of the sphere say a lot about how we want to be. A woman present at one of my lectures on happiness, pleasure and the art of living listed thoroughness and helpfulness as the important elements in her arena. She really wanted to be a careful and helpful per-

son. I am sure that she was perceived that way too. Yet she did not feel good about herself. She limped along in her marriage and at work. The straw that broke the camel's back was a quarrel and subsequent estrangement from a daughter. They had not seen each other for more than a year. The woman was very open about things. Her friends and co-workers knew something was wrong.

There was no doubt that she found a mission in being thorough and helpful, qualities that are hard to object to. But thoroughness and helpfulness was her Achilles heel. She believed that thoroughness would allow her to be perfect. And with her helpfulness, she believed that she should help everyone else before tending to her own wishes and needs. Thoroughness and helpfulness were obviously facets of her art of living. Yet she had poor insight into the nuances of balancing order, or thoroughness, with disorder, and in maintaining balance by helping others to help themselves. The woman looked at me somewhat skeptically when I shared these issues with her. It was obvious that she didn't completely agree with my points and, even as she disagreed, she did everything to hide.

- “What do you do?” I asked.
- “Cabin crew,” replied the woman a little taciturn.
- “You're a stewardess?”
- She nodded hesitantly.

I asked, “In your work as a flight attendant, how is it that you instruct an adult to help a child in the event that the cabin pressure drops and the oxygen masks are triggered?”

At first she looked a little confused, then smiled and replied: “Yes, adults must put their own oxygen mask on first, before placing one on a child.”

I nodded and pursued the point, “Does this match the way you help yourself in order to help others?”

When the woman went home that day, it was with a deeper insight into the art of being helpful: In order to help others, we must often start by helping ourselves. I have not spoken with her since, but I imagine that it is an insight that pops up every time she instructs passengers about the precautions for the drop in cabin pressure.

### **Depression as a Source of Inspiration and Learning**

In my work as a practitioner and now as sexologist and therapist, I have spoken with a lot of people who have had depression. They have been a true source of inspiration and learning for me. An illness like depression can teach us a lot about life and life's true values. I have repeatedly heard comments like, “Sure, I would have preferred not to have been depressed. That said, my depression made me more conscious about life and everything that really matters to me.” It is perceived as having been a valuable learning experience. Other people with depression have expressed how their illness has given them insight into a wide range of events that had stressed them for a long time. Herein lies the key to becoming better at taking care of ourselves in the hustle and bustle of life and with symptoms of stress—again a very important lesson about life and how to thrive.

We all know about unhappiness, both lack and excess of interest and other depression-like traits, at different times of life. It is quite natural and is exactly the reason why we feel depressed, down in the dumps, or bummed out. For a doctor to make the diagnosis of depression there must be at least two out of three so-called core symptoms present and at least two secondary symptoms. It may sound very technical but, nevertheless, it makes good sense. My first book looks at the first core symptom through a positive psychological lens. That symptom, the feeling of depression/sadness, corresponds to joy/happiness in its positive inflection. In my second book, *Desire and How to Have More of It (Få mere lyst)*, I likewise examine another core symptom of depression: markedly reduced or absent desire and interest, and its opposite.

## Vitality and Stamina within the Sphere

This guide focuses primarily on the third core symptom of depression as it connects with the art of living. That symptom is the lack of energy and increased fatigue, which in its opposite form becomes vitality and stamina, aspects of life that concern us all. Sometimes we talk about energy instead of resources. Energy as a term may also make sense and is perhaps the word you prefer. When we talk about energy we think of a bodily or mental resource, though the field of physics uses the word in a completely different way. By using the term vitality, I hope to avoid any doubt about what the concept precisely means. Physical and mental energy are also important resources related to our body and mind. They allow us to glow and feel bright in what we do.

For a doctor to diagnose depression, a patient has to have had at least two of the three core symptoms and at least two of the so-called secondary symptoms for at least two weeks running. Several of these accompanying symptoms such as reduced self-confidence or low self-esteem and sleep disorders are also of significance for our topic. Again, these are expressions that we can all have in certain situations or at certain points in life. The uplifting message is that there is much—a great deal even—that we ourselves can do to experience more joy and pleasure and greater vitality. While it is often the case that we need to do something uniquely suited to ourselves, there is also a lot of similarity when it comes to the particular methods we might choose.

## Pitfalls in the Sphere

In the art of living arena, things are not exclusively decked out with good qualities, values, exclusively fun activities, and other goodies. There are also pitfalls. In every aspect of life we have the potential to run into them. When this happens, we frequently react with unhappiness, lack of desire and energy, in short, a general failure to thrive, which in turn taxes our health and can lead to illness. I will briefly

mention some of the most common pitfalls and more of them come up in the second part of the book, where we focus on every element of life itself.

## Pitfall #1: An Over-Populated Sphere

No one can continue to fill the personal sphere with new values, activities and other things, no matter how laudable these things are. Like any other sphere, the art of living has limited space. For example, qualities such as thoroughness and stability are really good to have. But if you're expecting to be thorough, reliable, punctual, infallible, "the best", tough, persevering, and much more, you have some really high expectations. No one is perfect at everything. We cannot desire everything equally in this world or take an interest in everything. If we want too much, we can paradoxically end up with lack of desire because we're stressing ourselves with all our desires and interests. The same applies to our engagements. If we are anxiously engaged in many things at once, it can be really exciting. We can take everything on and really outdo ourselves by achieving one success after another. Nevertheless, the joy coming from the many activities and resources can suddenly disappear. When that happens, it is in many instances a sign of stress.

## Pitfall #2: Every Aspect of Life has Its Limits

All phenomena in life have limitations, no matter how laudable their qualities are at their core. Too much courage, for example, can end up as hubris and what many would call foolhardiness. Taking responsibility is a good thing, but if you feel responsible for everything from your children's back talk to the survival of polar bears, you've got a tough job. A resource has its limitations. Having a social resource like being open and extroverted is an advantage for most because in many ways we are living in an extroverted world. But there are situations where even the most open and outgoing person needs to retire and be alone.

What about love? Even human love has limits in real life. Some people say they love all living things, but then swat flies or jerk dandelions out of the lawn. So, it turns out that there are actually limits to having love for all living things. And you can't love someone else too much, or can you? Yes, it is actually possible to love so much that it is neither appropriate nor good. A case from the clinic is the man who loves a woman so much that he reacts with everything from performance anxiety to premature ejaculation, or difficulty in getting or maintaining an erection.

### **Pitfall #3: Each Element of Life Has a Downside**

In continuation of the conversation about love, the flipside of really great love may be the fear of losing love again. The fear might be that you are going to destroy the love relationship. You become afraid of not doing things well enough. In other cases the fear might be that something extraneous, like an illness or accident, could destroy the love relationship. The flipside of an intense feeling of love can also show up as jealousy, a complex emotion that is rooted in the desire to be the only one combined with the fear of loss. The fact is that we are often blind to the downsides that accompany every facet of life.

If we move away from the topic of love and try to think of aspects in life that might not have downsides, balance and personal strength come to mind. Is it really possible to have too much balance? Many people go to great lengths in striving for equality and balance. It often creates more peace and harmony, which is really nice. But the flipside of equality and balance is a lack of excitement and passion. Everything becomes boring, stagnant and bland. The art of living is to create balance in situations of imbalances that are inappropriate. But it is also part of the art of living to be able to take a detour and cultivate diversity and imbalance. Even personal strengths have their downsides. Our greatest strengths are also our greatest weaknesses, an issue we will revisit in the chapter on resources.

### **Pitfall #4: Lack of Awareness of the Sphere Easily Leads to Stress and Job Dissatisfaction**

Poor knowledge of one's individual sphere easily leads to a lack of awareness, confusion, wrong priorities and bad decisions. On the emotional level, we react differently with everything from discouragement, meaninglessness, anxiety and anger. This results in stress and the general failure to thrive. The antidote is obvious: With greater knowledge of life's elements comes more joy, pleasure, vitality and wellbeing. Life's elements are not one-size-fits-all, nor do they permanently stay the same size. They are shape shifting all the time and we continuously learn more about them along the path of greater wellbeing.

### **Pitfall #5: Negative Emotions and Stress Cause Tunnel Vision**

If we are filled with negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and anger, or if we are stressed enough, the human brain has the unique ability to lock on to a specific target or activity that we want to avoid. It may be appropriate in many situations, but dangerous in others. This is because the brain, in an attempt to stay focused, chooses to ignore a lot of information that would be enormously distracting were it to be let in. Negative emotions and stress can therefore cause tunnel vision for better or for worse. Our attention focuses on a specific goal or something we want to avoid. It may be just the right intervention if we are walking along a road and a big truck comes barreling toward us. It prompts us to lunge toward the ditch and dodge an accident. But it can also be inconvenient or dangerous in situations when we lose track of what is going on around us because of tunnel vision. In the case of rush hour traffic, it would obviously be good to avoid the truck, but less good if tunnel vision causes us to crash into a bicyclist instead.

Everyday life is full of examples of tunnel vision. An accountant who focuses on avoiding a certain type of accounting error is probably not going to make this type of error, but can easily make ten others. A pilot who fears a strong crosswind during takeoff focuses

so much on the windward side that he takes the wrong runway with fatal consequences. When it comes to negative emotions and stress, our brain both helps and challenges us, moves and fixes the focus and shuts down the vital areas of focus and life elements.

It is an art of living to be able to focus without losing track.