

*Living with*  
**TIME TO  
THINK**

*The goddaughter letters*

*Because they can think for themselves*



**'Every page is a gift... offers timeless wisdom for us all'**

**Mark Williams, bestselling co-author of *Mindfulness***

**NANCY KLINE**

# Contents

## Introduction

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## **Meghan**

### **Introduction**

1. Thinking For Yourself

2. Your Purpose

3. Nothing So Intimate

4. Intelligent Worship

5. Return To Solitude

6. The Right To Be Right

7. Waiting Until Thursday

8. The Amy Question

9. Interruption

10. Staying Surprise-able

11. Your Star

12. Somethings

13. Joy

## **Hattie**

### **Introduction**

---

1. Before They Die

---

2. You Choose

---

3. If It Doesn't Make You Dance...

---

4. Each Crystal Goblet

---

5. One Sentence

---

6. The Final 10 Per Cent

---

7. Enough Enemies

---

8. 'Let It Go'

---

9. The F Word

---

10. The Bigger Thrill

---

11. To Be

---

## **Kimberley**

### **Introduction**

---

1. It's Okay

---

2. Beginning With Love

---

3. What You Really Need

---

4. The Dig

---

5. 'Get Up Off The Sofa'

---

6. Every Wrinkle

---

7. 'Expect Nothing'

---

8. I'll Get Back To You

---

9. 'Have What You Have'

---

10. Being With The People You Are With

11. Success

12. Three Words

13. Movement

14. 'Hand Them The Moon'

**Postscript**

**Appendices**

**Index**

**Acknowledgements**

**Biography**

# Introduction

When they were young, each of my goddaughters asked me a question. The questions dazzled me. I needed to think about them. And I promised that someday I would answer. I hoped I would find a way that would be worthy of the questions. It took me many years.

I decided I could answer best through a collection of letters to each of them, which at different stages in their lives I completed and offered as a gift.

The three questions sprang from three very different girls at different ages. But each cradled a common, uncompromising theme: the injunction to think for yourself. Each question leapt with wild amounts of courage into the world of independent thinking.

And so the letters became an invitation to each girl to venture into her own mind, to listen to her own heart, to shape her own life.

As personal as the questions were, as focused as I was on the particular goddaughter as I wrote, the timeless nature of our conversation seemed to speak to any age. And we agreed that I would offer these letters now as a gift to you and to the people, young women or otherwise, who matter most to you.

These letters also witness my belief that it is the job of one generation to encourage the next. Specifically it is our job to encourage them to think for themselves. Most of their lives they are told not to. And their questions languish, unformed and unanswered.

‘Living with time to think’ is a demanding proposal. It may sound like time management. But it is not. It is a recognition that life itself should be a time of thinking, a time most crucially of thinking for ourselves. My 35 years of researching and teaching the conditions for people of all ages to do just that have convinced me that independent thinking, while still often forbidden, is the one thing on which everything else depends. The concept of the ‘Thinking Environment’ and my two

'Time to Think' books express this in the context of work and society. Living with Time to Think takes the concept to another, more personal level.

## Life itself should be a time most crucially of thinking for ourselves.

Young people do want to do their own thinking. They don't want us to grab them and drag them somewhere of our choosing. They want only our insights that will immediately lead them to their own.

They want to walk upright, at their own pace, down roads we could never have envisioned for them, taking risks we do not understand. They want to arrive somewhere new, having shaped on their way a world of their own generation, a world more compassionate and intelligent than ours.

I hope these letters point in that direction. But my answers are only to consider, not to swallow whole. Godmothers are no fonts. We are just certain people who love certain other people with all our hearts, and are honoured to be asked such big questions.

# Meghan

## **When I get to be a woman, how can I have a good life?**

When Meghan was ten, she was a passionate reader. As a young Quaker she had also heard in her school and family about equality and about the courage to live for peace. One day as she was reading, her little brother darted through the living room, making ack-ack sounds and pointing a make-believe gun at the ceiling. Meghan looked up. She frowned and sighed, 'Why do boys do stupid stuff like that?'

'Long story,' I said.

She went back to her book. A few minutes passed. Then she closed the book and was quiet. She looked over at me and said, 'Nancy, when I get to be a woman, how can I have a good life?'

Moved by the far reach of her question, I was quiet, too. Finally I told her I would get back to her about that one day. Maybe, I said, I would write her a letter.



# Hattie

## **Given that we all die, how do we find meaning in living?**

Just before Christmas each year I took Hattie shopping to choose her present. I was building for her, as my mother had for me, a collection of bone china 'odd' cups and saucers. Each year Hattie chose a different style and designer. My job was to drive her there and heroically say nothing while she chose.

Hattie was 12. On this trip through the Oxfordshire countryside, she said out of the comfortable quiet between us, 'Nancy, given that we all die, how do we find meaning in living?'

I was thrown, as I had been with Meghan, by the enormity of her question. I knew that she had lived through the possibility that her triplet brother would die from a brain tumour. And she had comforted me when my twin brother died from the same thing. Death had fallen into her life.

But this question was bigger even than that. I groped, and ultimately I told her I would think seriously about it and would one day offer her whatever insights I could. Maybe, I said, I would write her a letter.



# Kimberley

## **Today – how can we be happy?**

Pondering Meghan's and Hattie's questions some time later, I remembered that many years before, Kimberley, my niece and first goddaughter, had been first also to ask me a startling question. She was five at the time. She and I were on a drive under the New Mexico skies.

Out of nowhere she said, 'Aunt Nancy, today – how can we be happy?'

It was a question of the moment, but also of the ages. Although only five, she seemed, in pre-developed ways, already to see that the world prescribes a certain kind of happiness, happiness defined by others. 'How can we be happy today?' was no ordinary 'What can we do today?' question. It revealed, it seemed to me, an unconscious awareness of the practised elusiveness of this most prized of states.

I told her, much later in her life, that I was writing her a letter about that.

# Meghan

When I get to be a woman, how can I have a  
good life?

# Dear Meghan

## Introduction

When you were ten years old, I told you I would write something for you, something you could hold close to your heart, that you could turn to for backbone when feeling beguiled, count on to hold your hand when the light dims and the way recedes, and beckon you to joy no matter what.

I said this to you because you had said to me, ‘Nancy, when I am a woman, how can I have a good life?’ I was silenced by the question, by its importance and by your very grown-up concern. So, stalling, I said to you, ‘Meghan, I promise I will think about that.’

‘When?’ you asked.

‘Well, I’ll tell you what. I will write you a letter about that someday,’ I said.

‘Oh, good,’ you said, ‘when?’

After more silence, having no idea whether I ever could answer that question as fully or dependably as you deserved, I said, hugging you, ‘I don’t know for sure; but I promise I will.’

That was eight years ago. Now you are graduating from high school. And over that time I have written what I hope will be a friend for you. I offer it to you now, on the threshold of womanhood, as your sights soar towards a grown-up life, gracing the earth with your fine mind, your highly hewn awareness of others, your self-discipline, your outrage at injustice and your insistence on time to think and feel and decide things for yourself. With this book comes my love.

You asked me for advice. That is a siren’s moment. We think we know exactly what others need. And to be asked for advice is alluring. But with difficulty I resisted. I don’t really approve of it. I earn most of my living advising (paradoxically) against it. I encourage people (and you now) to think for themselves.

To do that we simply have to refuse to give advice. Only if the person has done their own thinking in our riveted, generative silence first (and has gobs of ideas of their own to show for it), and only if they beg us, can we even consider suggesting

what they might do.

This is because most of the time advice is infantilizing. It treats people like children (including children). And that keeps them from thinking for themselves. Advice asks one person to become the other. In that way it too often poisons the soil of the never-before-thought-of thought and is, therefore, probably one reason our world staggers. We are assuming that if we keep on coming up with the same ideas and doing the same things in the same way, somehow the results will be different. Fortunately, the world now sees this as one sign of madness.

## Advice asks one person to become the other.

In other words, advice by its nature assumes that what went before is good enough for what is needed now. But as there are hardly even two molecules alike in the entire universe, it is highly unlikely that what one person found helpful or elucidating in one complex moment of their life will be more than slightly useful in a differently complex moment of another's.

So advice is out.

But experience is in. And so is knowledge. They work. They open possibilities and nurture independent thinking. They say, 'Consider me; then take me or leave me.'

So I offer to you here my experience and my limited knowledge. You can do with it what you want, including highlighting it and dragging it decisively into the trash.

Because, actually, even taking care to use only the language of experience and knowledge I should nevertheless resist altogether and just say to you right now, 'I'll stop writing and come to your house, sit on your bed with you and listen beautifully while you come up with ideas for a good life that I have never thought of.' Then we could put all of those ideas into a book, wrap it with a golden ribbon and one day you could open it and marvel at the wisdom.

But when you were still under five feet tall, on your fourth reading of the entire 'Babysitter' series, before bras or boys or lacrosse or SATs, I told you I would write you something. And a deal is a deal. So I want you to have it now as you graduate from high school, and for the rest of your life, long after I am dead, even if it only occasionally grazes your life with relevance or applicability. I hope I have done your question justice. You have honoured me by asking it.

Life is short. It is melodious and wondrous. At times it is callous. At its best it

requires the best from us. And so, should you someday want to ask me again how, as a woman, you can have a good life, here is what I would say to you.



# Dear Meghan

## One

### Thinking For Yourself

I met with a group of six girls last month. They were there, on a Young Women As Leaders workshop, to think about expanding their student government.

We began with a simple question: ‘What do you think needs to be done?’ No one spoke. I asked them again. Nothing. And these were high-achieving, Harvard-in-their-sights 17-year-olds. Then one of them said, ‘Beats me. What do you guys think?’ (Why do girls call each other guys?) She pointed to her friends. They just looked at each other.

This is not the first time this has happened in the presence of that question. These leadership workshops usually begin here, with that blank look staring back at that simple question. The workshops encourage young people to think for themselves and to help each other do that. This scene was familiar.

In fact, leaders of all ages, when asked in the presence of their peers to say what they really think, often go blank in the eyes like that. I see this in corporate meetings and in boardrooms long after teenage conformity, long after Harvard and way too close to the end of life.

‘What do you think, really?’ I ask. They squirm. I ask again. Eventually they speak. But the time-lapse says everything.

Our world rarely wants to know what we really think; no one asks, and so we do not know; and so we plough on, task-focused midwives to the repetitive ideas of others. As a result, what we really think needs careful resurrecting because virtually every adult life has buried it. Schools and faith groups and professionals, not just parents, help in the burial, too – too often, too sadly, too inadvertently and sometimes too on purpose.

You, and only you, can do your own

In doing this, will I be able to contribute, to achieve, to discover, to offer to people and to the world, an expression of my purpose in being alive?

Is this thing I am about to do elegantly in line with the essence of me?

The answer will honour you. It and your integrity are the only two things that deserve your gracious obedience.



# Dear Meghan

## Three

### Nothing So Intimate

Let's do men a favour. Let's not expect them to be better than we are. They're not. Not inherently. Not just because they are men. Let's stop expecting them to be, so that we can spare them our disappointment when we find out they are not.

One of the worst things we do to men is to walk backward into adulthood expecting men to save us from the demands of our own excellence and competence, longing (however unconsciously) for them to shoot us up with the feeling of being small and protected, finding our meaning and worth in their eyes.

The world (even in this post-feminist, post-modern, post-everything era) has been telling you in your sleep and in your every waking moment, in most ads and videos (yes, even in *Gilda the Magnificent*) that however high women may rise in CNN or Congress, however precisely men might share the ironing, the dish-washing, the dribble-dabbing, the scalpel, the gavel, the pulpit or the cockpit, women are to expect men, just because they are men, to do that deep-down, fairy-tale, kissing-awake, rescuing, white-charger, glass-slipper thing – to lift us away from our self-sufficiency with their 'particularly male' last-minute saving of the day, offering us the ultimate confirmation: that because they want us, we as women are acceptable and valued, good enough, desirable and okay.

The myth is that men, after all, are superior to women in some non-crystalline, intrinsic sense. God said so. (And he should know because he is a man.)

The world does this a bit more surreptitiously than it did 20 years ago. Its key agent these days is the message inside organizations and politics that, sure, women are welcome here, but to enter they will have to leave their culture behind and take on men's culture. Come on in if you aspire to, they say to us; but get ready to become like us.

What?, they say to us later when we offer an alternative to the damage some of

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