

# Introduction: The World Is Unsafe — Or Are You?

"My love, they found cancer."

I remember those words hitting me like an invisible wall. For a few seconds my mind went blank and my body numb, and then everything came flooding back in. My wife had just received the results from a test showing cervical cancer. Our daughter hadn't even celebrated her first birthday yet.

Even though the prognosis for this type of cancer was relatively good, and my wife was otherwise young and healthy, I was well aware of the door that had just opened in our life. I could see how my mind wanted to minimise this moment, to crawl into some story of optimism and rationalise it away. And I was aware, from years of working as a therapist, of how many people who had faced cancer struggled afterwards because they hadn't entered that door. They hadn't allowed themselves to truly feel the grief, the fear, the full weight of what they'd been through — and those unmet feelings haunted them without them knowing it.

I knew that this door led to the possibility that my wife would become very sick and that she could die. That I would have to carry on without her, and that my daughter would grow up without knowing her mother.

And I knew I had to enter it. I had to feel what was there.

So I did. I allowed myself to look at her like it might be the last time. Just the thought of not having my best friend and my loving partner by my side on this journey was in itself devastating. All the moments we wouldn't get to share, growing old without her. But the hardest thing was watching her with our daughter. Seeing them play together, smile at each other, hold hands. And imagining our daughter years from now, asking about her mother. Who she was, what she was like, how their relationship was. I could feel something inside me tearing open, again and again, and the ground I thought I was standing on felt wiped away.

We lived with this for several days. Then the hospital called. There had been a mistake — they had misinterpreted the results. She didn't have cancer after all.

The relief was enormous. But I'm still grateful I entered that door, because it showed me something I already knew but had never felt so directly: life is much more fragile and much less stable than we like to believe.

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You've probably had your own version of this. Maybe not cancer, but something that cracked the ground open beneath you. A loss, a diagnosis, a divorce. A phone call that split your life into before and after. And in that moment you understood, not intellectually but somewhere in your body, that the stability you'd been living on was thinner than you thought.

That feeling doesn't only come from personal crisis. You can feel it in the world right now. The politics are polarised and trust in institutions is eroding. The climate is shifting in ways we can see with our own eyes. Wars are breaking out and threatening to spread. Artificial intelligence is advancing faster than anyone can make sense of, and no one seems sure whether it will help us or replace us.

Not a single phone call but a slow, constant cracking. A sense that things are falling apart and no one quite knows what to do about it.

If you've picked up this book, you probably feel it too. Something feels off, and it's hard to shake.

And yet this sense that the world is unstable, that human life is a fragile journey — isn't that the reality humans have always lived with?

Because life has never been stable. Not really. People have always gotten sick, always lost the ones they loved. For most of human history, losing a child to illness or in birth was common. And beyond the personal, there were famines, plagues, wars, the collapse of entire civilizations. None of this is to say that what we're facing today isn't serious and requires that we deeply care and act. In some ways the stakes are higher than ever before. But the ground has never been as solid as we wanted it to be, whether the threat was a crumbling empire or a sick child in the middle of the night.

What was different, for most of our history, is that people had something to hold onto. Religions gave meaning and philosophies offered explanations. Shared beliefs made suffering feel like part of a larger story: heaven, karma, progress, purpose. These stories didn't make life

easy, but they made it more bearable. They gave people somewhere to stand.

Today, many of those stories have stopped working. For a lot of us, the old beliefs no longer feel true. And what's replaced them? Mostly distraction. Screens, entertainment and shopping, and the quiet promise that if we just get more — more success, more money, more experiences — we'll finally feel okay.

But here's the strange thing.

Even when life is going well, when you have the relationships, the job, the health, the security, there's often still a quiet feeling that something is missing. Not something dramatic, just a subtle restlessness. An itch you can't quite scratch. A sense that despite everything being fine, you're not quite... settled.

Have you noticed this?

I call it the existential itch — that persistent, low-level feeling that something about existence itself isn't quite right. Not wrong with your life, exactly. Something deeper than that. It doesn't go away when you achieve things. It doesn't go away when life gets easier. It just sits there, underneath everything.

So here's the real question. If the world suddenly became stable, if the politics calmed down and the climate crisis resolved. If your life arranged itself exactly as you hoped — perfect health, no loss, every relationship thriving, everything optimised and in place — would that feeling finally disappear, or would it still be there?

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I think it would still be there. Because I believe that feeling doesn't come from the conditions of your life. It comes from somewhere inside you.

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Throughout history and across cultures, there have always been some people — often mystics, monastics and philosophers — willing to devote everything to understanding this itch. That refused to settle for fantasy or comforting beliefs, but wanted to know what was actually true. And they pointed to something remarkable: that there was an end to it. They called it different things — enlightenment, awakening, liberation, union with God — all pointing to a deep peace, but not the peace of a good day or a quiet mind. Something that stays whether you're having the best or the worst day of your life. A peace that holds because something underneath is okay, even when the surface isn't.

When I was about ten, something in me started wondering whether any of that was real. Growing up in a small village in northern Norway, this kind of influence was nowhere to be found. Among my friends I was just an ordinary kid, but deep down I was a closet yogi. Quietly consumed by the big questions: what is God, what is life, what is goodness. By my early teens I had spent all my savings travelling across the country for a meditation and yoga retreat. Over the years I studied with teachers from many traditions, lived in monasteries, and had experiences that seemed profound. And yet, decades later, that quiet restlessness underneath never fully went away.

So I came at the question from a different angle. I studied psychology, became a therapist, and sat on the other side of the couch as a client myself. It became even clearer that what therapy was trying to solve and what those wisdom traditions were pointing toward were not the same thing. Therapy helped enormously — but it didn't touch that deeper layer. Rather it made me wonder if we could look at what the traditions were working with through the same rational lens.

In psychotherapy, one of the most important things we've learned is how much depends on early attachment. When a child grows up feeling safe, when their emotions are welcomed and their needs are met, they develop the confidence to show up as they are. But when love feels conditional — when certain emotions are not welcomed, but ignored or met with anger — children adapt. They hide the parts of themselves that seem to cause problems, develop defences, and those patterns follow them into adult life.

This is what therapy works with. It creates enough safety that people can begin to let go of what no longer serves them, and gradually become safe being their authentic selves.

And there's a clear logic to it. Something happened, something keeps it going, and something can help it resolve.

I started wondering whether the same could be true for what those wisdom traditions were working with. Not just a philosophical or religious problem, but something with roots in our actual lives.

I sat with that question for years. And the answer came from somewhere I didn't expect.

My daughter was three weeks old, crying intensely in my arms. If you've ever held an infant that cries with their whole being, and you can't understand what's wrong or manage to help, you know how unsettling it can be. And in that moment, her distress was clearly shaking up my own. I noticed myself trying to get her attention to land somewhere else — bouncing, making sounds, moving around the room, bringing out some object. But then I caught myself. Her crying was

causing me discomfort, and my effort to soothe her was actually a way of getting away from my own. I wasn't helping her. I was running from myself, and in some way teaching her to do the same.

So I stopped. I took a deep breath and allowed what she was feeling to fill me completely. Because if I wasn't safe fully experiencing this, what was I actually telling her? I held her and swayed gently, not to distract but to be with her in that distress — to show her: even if life feels extremely uncomfortable, it can nevertheless be safe.

When she finally calmed down, I really looked at her. Her open, curious eyes, just taking in the whole world. That pure innocent presence you see in infants. Consciousness looking out, but no self-consciousness. Not yet being someone, just being.

And it was like a lightning of clarity. If there's no self here yet — then whatever she's learning right now isn't being stored the way you and I store memories. No autobiography being written, no story of "something bad happened to me." Could it be that whatever gets learned at this stage gets absorbed globally — not "I am unsafe with daddy" — but existence itself is unsafe?

I began to wonder whether there was a deeper question than the one therapy was asking. Relational attachment asks whether we can feel safe being with others. But what about feeling safe just being? What about existential attachment?

That existential itch I described earlier — I believe this is where it comes from. And if something can go wrong at this level, the healing would need to reach this level too — all the way down to our relationship with being itself.

This insight didn't remain a theory for me. It became the thread that finally brought my own thirty-year search to an end. Existential safety wasn't just an idea I arrived at — it became what filled my entire being.

This also made me see those ancient traditions in a completely new light. I believe what those mystics and contemplatives were actually trying to solve was this: a deep fracture in our very sense of being, making us feel existentially unsafe. What they called enlightenment, union with God, liberation — is a return to existential safety.

Not something mystical. Something developmental. That's the premise of this book. And it rests on a conviction: that existential attachment is a real layer of human development, as real and as important as relational attachment. But while relational attachment is now widely

understood, existential attachment remains almost completely unknown. This book is my attempt to make a small contribution to changing that.

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## How This Book Works

This book moves in four parts.

**The Longing** takes you back to the very earliest phase of life to understand where the wound comes from and how it shapes the self that emerges on top of it.

**The Landscape** shows how the world's wisdom traditions are all working with this same terrain — and helps you understand where you are standing on it.

**The Path** is where understanding becomes practice. I'll walk you through a clear framework for healing, grounded in both ancient wisdom and modern psychology.

**The Return** explores what life looks like when existential safety is restored. Not a permanent high, but an ordinary, grounded way of being — deeply at peace with the full messiness of being human.

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Before we begin, I want to say something important. What I'm offering in this book is a perspective — one way of making sense of something that has been described in many ways across many traditions. I am deeply grateful for every teacher, every practice, every tradition that has shaped my understanding. Without them, none of this would exist.

One of the things I've learned from years as a psychologist is the value of pragmatism. A healing framework doesn't need to be the final truth about reality — it needs to be a story that resonates. One that clearly describes the problem, makes sense of what keeps it going, and points toward how it can be resolved. This is the story that did that for me. May it do the same for you.

It took me thirty years to understand what I'm about to show you, and my hope is that it saves you some of that time. As you may remember, my greatest teacher through all of it turned out to be my three-week-old daughter — and it is to that phase of life, and even earlier, that we need to return to.

Back to when you were just consciousness itself, floating in the warm darkness of the womb.

# Chapter 1: The Core Wound — Earlier Than You Remember

I remember the explosion of feelings when we learned my wife was pregnant for the first time. The joy, the laughter and excitement — and underneath it all, a certain nervous thrill. We looked at each other, with huge smiles on our faces, wordlessly acknowledging this time it's for real, it's actually happening.

For my wife it became a reality in ways I couldn't access. Her body was changing, telling her things I couldn't feel. For me, it landed more deeply the first time I saw that ripple of movement across her belly, revealing our daughter in a whole new way. That same joy, that giddiness, that amazement — all of it hitting at once.

I remember putting my head against my wife's belly, speaking softly, trying to imagine what it was like existing in there.

I kept returning to that question in the years that followed — what was it actually like in the womb? Because understanding that hidden world felt so central to understanding existential attachment, we need to explore it together.

## The Womb of Existence

Imagine yourself before birth, floating weightless and suspended in warm fluid. Gravity hasn't yet made its claim on you, and every surface of your body is held in soft, consistent pressure.

In this place, I believe two fundamental qualities shape your entire existence.

The first is harmony. Your mother's heartbeat drums steadily while her breathing rocks you in gentle tides. Light barely penetrates this world, and temperature remains more or less constant. Nourishment flows through your umbilical cord automatically—no hunger, no waiting, no effort required. You don't have to cry to be fed or struggle to be warm because everything you need simply arrives. Most of the time, your needs are met before they're even needs. Harmony isn't something you achieve—it's the baseline of existence.

The second is safety and runs much deeper. Even when the harmony breaks—like when your mother's stress hormones reach you, her movements startle you, or oxygen levels fluctuate—something crucial remains intact. There's no message that this distress is wrong, and no one tries to stop you from feeling it or distract you from it. You can't be abandoned with your discomfort because you're embraced constantly. The stress is simply included, fully held within this unwavering container.

Whatever you experience—pleasant or unpleasant—is simply allowed to be. All is well.

Harmony depends on conditions being right. Safety doesn't depend on anything—it's the unconditional holding of whatever arises. These two primordial conditions I believe weave together to create your first template of what it means to exist.

## **The Conditions of Reality: When Harmony Ends**

After months of existing in that warm, contained world, birth changes everything—gravity claims you, the constant temperature gives way to cold air on wet skin, the muffled sounds explode into sharp clarity, and the dim redness becomes blinding light. The automatic nourishment of oxygen and nutrients is replaced by the sudden demand to coordinate eating, breathing, and digesting.

Even with the most loving parents, this transition is clearly a huge challenge. Your needs, once met automatically, are now externalized and require communication to be fulfilled. And even then—help doesn't always come immediately, and what comes isn't always what you need. Sometimes nothing relieves the gas pain, the bright lights, and the overwhelm of being completely new in this world.

The harmony you knew in the womb fragments into moments. The reliable background of well-being no longer blankets your experience. It becomes conditional, dependent on circumstances aligning just right.

The sense that life is constant change becomes much clearer. Without words or concepts, you learn — more fully than ever before — that all states pass. Comfort dissolves into discomfort, satisfaction gives way to hunger, and connection alternates with aloneness. Your nervous system is now faced with the enormous task of learning how to navigate this new landscape of variability and imperfection.

This transition into reality is naturally stressful—an initiation all of us must face. Though the evidence is clear that we cannot have permanent harmony in this changing world, something in us never stops longing for what we lost.

### *Chasing the Echo*

I think the complete harmony you once experienced leaves a deep imprint—like an echo of a place where everything felt perfectly at ease. This longing for harmony becomes a compass, signaling when something feels off course. In itself, this isn't a problem—it can guide us toward balance, toward creating conditions that support our well-being.

But here's where things get complicated. That longing for harmony can quietly become something else — a search for a permanent state of ease. A place where discomfort finally stops. We pursue it in different ways: the perfect relationship, the right career, a better version of ourselves. Some look for it in spiritual traditions, where enlightenment is often presented as exactly this — a return to unbroken harmony, a state beyond stress and difficulty. In each case, I think we are tapping into the same unconscious wish — the desire to crawl back into the womb, where harmony was more or less constant.

But this wish is a compass that doesn't actually point where we think it does. Harmony is conditional and temporary — and any life built on the pursuit of permanent ease will eventually crash against reality.

If there's one thing life outside the womb shows us, it's that harmony is not guaranteed. Instead, we face constant change and stress — two forces that human culture deeply struggles to accept and integrate. We seek to bypass them through the continual pursuit of pleasure, attempts to optimize and control life, finding the right partner, the right career, or through visions of transcendent escape like heaven or enlightenment.

Take a moment to notice this in your own life. Think of your best experiences — falling in love, a moment of deep connection, a time when everything felt meaningful and alive. Now

recall the most painful ones — grief, heartbreak, despair, when life seemed to fall apart.

Did any of those last?

Yet despite this evidence, we continue hoping for that final resting place. We are sold the idea constantly — that the right life is achievable. The perfect relationship, the optimized body, the successful career, the curated feed that reflects back exactly who we want to be. And some seek it in spiritual traditions, where the promise of permanent inner peace, never angry, never sad, always at ease, can be just as seductive. In each case the fantasy is the same: a state where discomfort finally stops.

The problem is that this fantasy doesn't just fail to deliver — it makes things worse. The more we chase that permanent ease, the more our natural feelings of sadness, anxiety or frustration seem like evidence that something is wrong with us. That we haven't worked hard enough, optimized enough, grown enough. Our very humanness starts to feel like a failure.

If you are honest with yourself, is there something in you that hopes that state is possible? That one day, if you get enough right, you'll finally feel permanent harmony?

### *The Deeper Foundation*

Instead of clinging to harmony as the goal, we should listen to reality and consider something deeper. Even when harmony wasn't constant in the womb, something else was present—safety, a deep knowing that all was fundamentally well, regardless of conditions.

What if what you're searching for isn't the absence of stress but the presence of safety—a deeper ground that can hold whatever arises? What if nothing is wrong with whatever is appearing right now, even if painful or stressful, so long as it can be experienced as fundamentally safe?

The loss of harmony as we have seen is inevitable. But the loss of safety? That's where the real wound begins.

## **The Conditions of Culture: When Safety Is Lost**

We've seen how constant change and stress are woven into reality—something we all must face once we leave the womb. But rather than embracing these forces, we inherit humanity's ancient struggle with them. We learn not just to fear discomfort, but to split from it and flee toward pleasure. This cultural conditioning begins as soon as we enter the world, through something so ordinary we rarely question it. Yet its impact runs deeper than we realize because in those early months, we don't have a sense of self, only a sense of being, and it's this sense of existence itself that becomes unsafe.

That claim might sound overblown until you understand how you actually experienced the world as an infant. You didn't live in our adult world of selves and others, with emotions and memories. You existed as something else entirely. When distress happened, it wasn't experienced as something happening to someone, caused by someone. If left alone to cry yourself to sleep, it's unlikely it felt like 'I'm scared because mommy isn't coming' — but rather the whole of existence becoming terrifying.

I believe there are three fundamental ways your experiences as an infant differed from how you experience life now.

**First, you were conscious but not self-conscious.** When you entered the world, you were clearly conscious, but there was no "I" having these experiences, no sense of being a subject looking out at objects. Without the cognitive development that creates self-consciousness, there was no separation between experiencer and experience—just one continuous flow of existence.

**Second, your experience was existential, not relational.** Without a self, there was also no other. You didn't experience yourself as a separate being interacting with other beings. Everything that happened — whether pleasant or painful — happened to the totality.

**Third, you experienced affect, not emotions.** In this phase of life, you didn't have what we call emotions. We don't say a one-month-old baby is "happy," "sad," or "angry." Instead, you experienced something more fundamental — what scientists call the affective system: the underlying physiology of existence.

Understanding these three reveals something crucial: when safety is lost at this pre-verbal phase, it doesn't create a psychological wound stored in memory and emotions. It creates an existential wound encoded directly in your affective system — a wound that shapes everything that follows.

This is why understanding affect matters — not as a concept, but as something felt in the body. We'll only introduce it here and go much deeper later in the book, but take note of it, since

it is foundational for the work to come.

Picture the affective system as the physiological ground of existence, organised along two dimensions.

The first is arousal — the activation level of the nervous system. High arousal means the sympathetic nervous system — the body's gas pedal — is engaged: alert, activated, intense. Low arousal means the parasympathetic system — the body's brake — dominates: quiet, still, subdued. The second dimension is whether the experience feels pleasant or unpleasant.

The psychologist James Russell called this core affect — the foundational physiology beneath all our experiences. I think of it simply as your sense of being — moving through four basic states that I'll call the four landscapes of being.

### *!The Four Landscapes of Being*

Thinking of them as landscapes gives them a visceral quality that abstract labels can't. And since these are the inner territories this journey asks us to inhabit fully, that felt sense of them matters. A meadow with a smooth river flowing by, calm and open, everything at ease. A hike through forest, a thundering waterfall, the thrill of climbing high into the treetops. A ragged mountain path, sharp cliffs, dangerous heights, a heavy pack on your back. A swamp, misty, slow, heavy to breathe, the ground sinking beneath each step.

You recognize them, don't you? When you think of your life — a month, a week — isn't this the basic terrain you move through? We might wish for a world of only pleasant landscapes, but unfortunately that's just a fantasy. In my clinic, the majority of people have been carrying heavy packs up steep hills for far too long. And when they finally come to me, they have often already entered the swamp — some sunken in up to their ankles, others up to their waist.

We all prefer the pleasant landscapes, and it's natural and healthy to spend as much time there as possible. But most of us have inherited something more than a simple preference — an attachment to the pleasant ones and an aversion to the unpleasant ones that goes well beyond what's helpful. So how does this relationship come about?

### *Three Responses to Distress*

Now imagine you're that one-month-old infant in distress. Perhaps it's hunger, a wet diaper, or the raw intensity of needing a warm chest to fall asleep on. You're in that high arousal,

unpleasant state—your whole being is crying out, seeking help to return to calm.

From this moment of distress, three responses are possible. I'm leaving aside more severe responses like anger or abuse—those create additional trauma. What I want to show is how even loving, well-intentioned caregiving can wound us at the existential level.

But being injured is part of life—physically, emotionally and existentially. We are not aiming for perfection here. Much of what I've written comes from seeing my own limitations, my inherited patterns playing out with my children. The problem isn't that wounds occur but that we don't recognize them or know how to heal. Understanding how the wound forms is the first step, and that's what the following three paths will show you—each teaching something fundamental about whether existence itself is safe.

### **The Path of Abandonment**

Sometimes no one comes. Perhaps parents are following expert advice to let you "cry it out" and develop "independence"—asking how quickly you can adapt to their needs rather than how they might adapt to yours. Perhaps they're overwhelmed, exhausted, or struggling with their own pain. Or perhaps you were unlucky and the baby monitor failed and no one heard your cries.

When you're left alone in distress, your sympathetic nervous system—the gas pedal—accelerates. Your heart races as stress hormones flood your system and your crying intensifies. This is healthy initially—it's designed to bring help. But here's what our culture doesn't understand: infants cannot self-regulate. You literally lack the neural development to calm yourself down. You need another nervous system, a regulated adult presence, to help you return to baseline.

So when no one comes, that gas pedal stays floored. You remain in high arousal, unpleasant, with nowhere to go. Your distress climbs higher and higher until something else happens—your parasympathetic nervous system slams on the emergency brake.

This isn't calming. It's collapse. You shift from high arousal unpleasant to low arousal unpleasant—from desperate crying to numb withdrawal. From the outside, you might look peaceful, and parents might think you've learned to "self-soothe." But you've actually disconnected from your own experience. This is biological dissociation — and the word itself tells you what's happening. From the Latin *dissociare*: to split apart, to sever what was joined. Your nervous system's built-in defense when overwhelmed — a splitting from being itself when being becomes too much to bear.

And sometimes this is exactly what's happening in the parent. Those who carry their own unprocessed wounds can be overwhelmed by their infant's cries. The distress resonates in their body, activating their own early patterns, and their nervous system does the only thing it knows: disconnect. They become emotionally numb, absent—not from lack of love, but from physiological overwhelm.

But this path of abandonment may not have been a significant part of your early life, and for most children, it isn't. There's a far more common way that attention learns to split from being, and this one, almost none of us escaped.

### **The Path of Distraction**

Try to remember the last time you heard a baby crying intensely. What happened inside you? How did you feel? Naturally, that sound is designed to disturb us—to signal the urgency of coming to the aid of a helpless infant. But too often this distress resonates with our own, causing our behavior to have unconscious intentions that don't necessarily serve the child.

Something in us gets stirred up. And when rushing to help, we're not so much relating to the child as to our own distress. This might sound strange, but really contemplate: what is your relationship to discomfort? Do you manage to embrace it, give it space and safety to just be—or do you want it to change and go away as quickly as possible?

Watch yourself—or watch others—around a distressed baby. Notice how common it is to reach for distraction. The rattle appears, funny faces and sounds, and we bounce and jiggle—trying our best to get attention to land on something more pleasurable. Basically hypnotizing the child into something more soothing by engaging the various sense modalities.

What is being transmitted is humanity's relationship to distress. The message, though not consciously intended, is that these unpleasant affective states are not safe, and we must flee with our attention toward the more pleasant ones.

This conditioning can be called cultural dissociation: a learned splitting that causes a division inside our very sense of being, between what is safe and what is not.

This is the path most of human culture has chosen. Look around: we've built a civilization that has made a kind of peace with the stressful landscape — busyness and productivity are praised, stress is worn as a badge of honour. But rather than finding genuine rest in the calmer states, we run to the exciting landscape and all the distractions and stimulations offered there. The capitalist engine runs on this cycle — growth at all costs paired with consumption as

salvation. Two landscapes dominate, and the other two are largely ignored.

Just as we have a certain blindness to the infant's overwhelm, we seem blind to the same state in our culture and planet — the rise of depression, meaninglessness, and a biosphere slowly collapsing.

Meanwhile, simple contentment, compassion and care is often seen as weak, unproductive and boring. But what culture deems least valuable might very well be the most precious landscape of all.

### **The Path of Presence**

There's a third possibility where the adult responds to your distress but doesn't try to change it. They hold you, rock you, make soothing sounds. But the quality is entirely different from distraction.

Think of singing in the shower and hitting a note where suddenly the whole room seems to vibrate with you—a resonance. When a child is in distress, that affective energy travels into us. It starts vibrating in our own body. But usually we don't like that vibration. We don't want to feel what it stirs up. We want another tune—a more pleasant one.

You can sometimes see this when watching someone hold a crying baby. Pay close attention to the quality of their movement. Are they swaying in tune with the child, or is there a stressed, disconnected, repetitive bouncing—something that serves more to distract the child than to meet them where they are? The difference is subtle but profound. If you've ever held a baby yourself, you probably noticed this difference—how remarkable it feels when you're truly in tune, this lovely intimacy and space that allows the child to just be. It doesn't mean the crying will stop. It means whatever needs to be felt can move freely, without being rushed or blocked.

This is commonly called co-regulation, though I feel co-vibration captures it better. The adult has enough space and safety to allow whatever tune is being played to resonate within them. If you're in high arousal unpleasant—that sharp, jagged, irregular intensity—they let it vibrate through their body while remaining stable. If you're in low arousal unpleasant—that slow, stagnant, collapsed heaviness—they stay present without feeling the need to bring the energy up. Something in them can meet it with warmth and softness, a ground that holds whatever arises.

Their presence communicates something words cannot: I am right here with you, this is a safe place, all is well even if it's painful and uncomfortable.

This teaches something deeply important: all states of the affective system are safe to experience and will naturally transform in their own time. Distress doesn't need to be escaped and excitement doesn't need to be clung to. Your sense of being is fundamentally safe.

### *The Wounded Foundation*

But for most people their sense of being is not fundamentally safe—and this is so normalized it goes mostly unnoticed, even within contemporary healing traditions like my own profession of psychotherapy. Our understanding of relational attachment—how caregivers shape emotional and relational safety—only emerged in the last century, most notably through the work of Mary Ainsworth, whose research showed how profoundly a caregiver's quality of presence shapes a child's sense of security. But the existential attachment I have described lies beneath that, and I believe the wisdom traditions have known of it for millennia — pointing to something fundamental about existence, though clouded in language that can be hard to grasp today.

This is the wounded physiological platform that all later development builds upon. From it, a seeker emerges—endlessly searching for what cannot be found. That's where our story continues.