How We Break



Navigating the Wear and Tear of Living

'Wise and compassionate'
NEW STATESMAN



Vincent Deary

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How We Break

'In *How We Break*, the health psychologist Vincent Deary suggests some answers for "navigating the wear and tear of living" . . . depths of pain are quietly plumbed within these pages . . . This essential self-exploration underlines the deeply humane plea which is the heartbeat of the book: for more self-compassion . . . There is much wisdom in Deary's regret that this society has neglected the idea of convalescence' Bel Mooney, *Daily Mail*

'From a deep mine of science, philosophy, art and personal experience, Vincent Deary has produced a treasure of a book. Every page of *How We Break* gleams with wisdom and insight. Nobody could fail to be enriched by it' Matt Rowland Hill, author of *Original Sins*

'Drawing on a wide range of sources about the human experience, Vincent Deary has written a warm and compassionate book about how we hurt and how we heal. A rich and humane work' Gwen Adshead, author of *The Devil You Know*

'The psychologist and researcher's persuasive inquiry into how life's struggles take their toll is full of hard-won wisdom . . . There is a rawness to Deary's analysis that gives a compelling human edge to his theorizing' Tim Adams, *Observer*

'It is refreshing to read a psychology book that isn't trying to push you towards a particular goal; to achieve more, to work harder . . . Deary delivers a much-needed message: we have a finite capacity to meet the unpredictable challenges life throws at us . . . A particular strength of the book is the way Deary weaves between different schools of thought within psychology, philosophy and religion. The result is not merely a discussion of abstract ideas, but a collection of valuable observations about what it means to be human in the modern world . . . Deary makes a compelling argument as to the necessity of self-compassion. He leads us to a more humane understanding of our suffering and offers practical advice for navigating life's ups and downs with greater grace and equanimity' Alex Curmi, *Guardian*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vincent Deary is Professor of Applied Health Psychology at Northumbria University, where his research focuses on the development of new psychosocial interventions for people with a variety of health complaints, including cancer survivors and fear of falling in older adults. As a clinician he works in the UK's first trans-diagnostic Fatigue Clinic, to help people for whom fatigue is a disabling symptom.

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To Elayne,
for holding us all together.

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The plane's
supposed to shudder, shoulder on
like this. It's built to do that. You're
designed to tremble too. Else break

Adrienne Rich, 'Turbulence'

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Introduction

I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalm 139

We live in worlds of our own. The moment you awaken, the world begins. Every day, without thinking or conscious effort, you make this world you live in. But you and I are not gods of our worlds because we are not in charge of their means of production. It has taken billions of years of evolution and a significant portion of your early life for your brain and nervous system to get this good at world building, to get so good at it that you don't even know you are doing it, let alone how. But you do it. Every day when you awaken, a unique world wakes up with you. We take this daily miracle for granted but it is worth stopping sometimes to consider the wonder of you.

Look around you. Look at what you actually are, here and now. Before you are body, or nervous system or brain or mind, your most immediate experience of yourself is as a *medium* through which, in which, a world is manifested with you at its centre. More faithfully than the most hi-tech audio-visual media system, your system encodes its environment into a coherent multi-sensory spectacle with an audience of precisely one. Both medium and audience, we spend our lives in these worlds of our own making. Worlds that are composed of significance as much as sensation. Woven through with meaning, order, value, purpose, passions and concerns, we live in worlds of significant things. Nothing matters to anyone else quite the way it matters to you. Your happiness will have unique determinants, giving it a different flavour to mine. Your moments of wonder

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and fulfilment will have a singular thrill coming as they do at turning points in a narrative that is unique to you. And as with your happiness and wonder, so with your fear and trembling. Each of us will break in our own way.

Which is not to say we don't have a lot in common, and that we can't tell a common story about how we come to be unhappy, worried, fearful, hopeless, exhausted. We share our life world, the human arena where many of the forces that cause us to tremble and break reside. And we share the basic mechanisms and processes by which we make and navigate our own and our shared worlds. These same mechanisms that weave meaning, passion and energy into our lives are also those that underpin our unravelling, our breaking. We break where we live. Which is why this book was preceded by one titled *How We Are*. To understand how we break, we need to first understand the kind of creatures we are. To do that, in *How We Are*, we looked at everyday people going through everyday cycles of habit and change, effort and ease, to build a picture of the mechanisms that comprise us and help us navigate our daily living. Don't worry, you don't need to read that first; I'll summarize the main points here to set the scene for this darker, but hopefully illuminating and helpful, second book.

You are singular precisely because of the kind of creatures we both are. For not only are we a medium for the world, we are also a *recording medium*. We are the expression of an unimaginably old genetic recording of countless encounters with the world. And from the moment we are born, life begins to inscribe itself within us. We adapt and survive, sometimes thrive, because we are so deeply impressionable to the environments in which we spend our time. Experience gets written into us not only as memory but also in the settings of our physiological systems. In the same way our immune systems remember every danger they have met, so does our nervous system encode past dangers and pleasures so that we might avoid or repeat them in the present. And we inscribe not only what we think and feel about where we have spent our time, but what to *do* about it. Our minds, our hearts and our wills – our systems of thinking,

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feeling and action – establish automatic yet complex repertoires of routine and habit that enable us to deal with our daily world almost without thinking and without expending too much energy. Each of us is made, wired, to be able to do this, to have our heart, mind and will remember who we are and how to live so that we don't consciously have to. That's what habits are for, to maintain the stable equilibrium of the complex system that is you at minimal cost to energy and attention. This is the process of *homeostasis*, the largely automatic work we do every moment of every day just to stay the same. A lot of your metabolic load is being expended right now just to keep you as you are.

And our automaticity is not just embodied, not just written in nerve and flesh. It is also extended and embedded, recorded in the people, places and things that comprise our worlds. Again, look around, look at the world you have built for yourself. Look at where you spend your time, the rooms you do your living in; look at what's on the walls and on the shelves and in the cupboards; look at the people who are often in the rooms with you, the friends, family, foes, colleagues and neighbours you have collected. Look around and you will see yourself looking back at you. But as these encounters, events, people and places are formative of us, so they have the power to be *de*formative and to write terror and damage into our book. In Part One of this book, 'Trembling', we consider the nature of these toxic exposures, both early and ongoing. Individually and collectively, we are often embroiled in circumstances that play most cruelly on our hearts, minds and wills, that push our regulative mechanisms to the point where they are struggling to cope.

But we are indeed designed to tremble, to cope with the turbulence of life. Often that comes in the form of change. Change, and what it demands of us physically, emotionally and cognitively, was the other focus of *How We Are*. Changing is harder work than staying the same, though both are work. Change is emotionally turbulent, energetically costly and demands conscious care and attention. So it pays to be innately conservative, to keep change at bay if we can. It's less work and, for a while at least, more comfortable to keep running

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old stories and habits. We have an inbuilt cognitive and behavioural resistance to the new; we work to try to make our *now* just another version of our *then*, so that nothing new needs to be decided, no extra effort needs to be made, no discomfort felt. But a tendency to get stuck in old ways, even in the face of new demands, can become a source of our trembling and breaking. To paraphrase Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazlewood, *we keep saming when we ought to be changing*.

But the complex organism in which we are embodied is as good at changing as it is at saming. When it has to, it knows how to respond to new demands. For we are not only a medium for the world, and a recording of our dealings with it, we are also a *transformative medium*. The world changes us, but we also change the world. This world that you awaken to every morning is woven through with imperatives and urgencies, with deficits and tasks. Some are yours, some you are in thrall to. Either way, we have designs upon the world and upon ourselves; there is always work to be done. To do this work is more energetically costly than staying the same. In changing we are constantly reading signals from the environment and from our own bodies, anticipating and predicting what comes next, constantly comparing the work to be done to our available resources and regulating them accordingly, all in the service of a story about how the world should be. This act of real-time navigation is what is known as *allostasis*, the work of maintaining stability in the face of change. In performing this complex and demanding work, we tremble. Change is a turbulent journey. Our systems shudder as we adjust and that shuddering shows up as physiological arousal, as preoccupation and as effort and energy expenditure. Our hearts, minds and wills – our emotional, cognitive and biological resources – are altered and drained when too much is demanded of them for too long, or when the demands don't stop coming. This is what is known as *allostatic load*, the wear and tear that happens when the turbulence is too much. Understanding the kinds of rhythms, events, encounters and systems of meaning that make us tremble, that's the territory of Part One. Understanding

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how these basic mechanisms of heart, mind and will are altered and broken by what we encounter in the world is the territory of Part Two, 'Breaking'.

To be clear right from the start, this is not a book about mental illness. This is a book about you and me and what happens when we are pushed past our limits. And for sure, some of us will end up with a formal diagnosis, or under a system of care. But we all have a breaking point at which things start to unravel. What pushes us to that point, and what that unravelling looks like, will be specific to each of us. Our breaking, like our world, will be our own. So I won't be making much use of formal diagnostic categories. I'll be taking a more dimensional approach to distress, i.e., one which locates it at the extreme ends of the continuum of normal functioning, which understands it as the dysregulation and disharmony of the same systems that enable our navigation of daily life.

Some worry that if we stop naming specific disorders, such as depression or social anxiety, and start talking about 'trans-diagnostic processes' – the few fundamental processes underlying all disorders – then we are in danger of losing the specialized help and detailed understanding of specific disorders that have taken us years to build. But there is a middle ground between a categorical and dimensional story of distress. Life is rarely either/or. Diagnostic labels matter. A diagnosis is a ticket to access expert help. I have seen first-hand the damage done to people with poorly understood or misdiagnosed conditions who have had to do long, hard and exhausting labour to get their conditions recognized, named and helped. But labels needn't exclude a dimensional understanding of what lies beneath them. Take 'social anxiety' as a term and a condition. Yours may be very different from mine. I can talk in front of hundreds of people but find sitting at a small dinner party intensely uncomfortable. For my daughter Vicky, it mainly shows up when she is walking down the street and she begins to feel the crimson burning in her cheeks, marking her out as a beacon for scrutiny. Our cases are quite different, but they share a family resemblance. Running underneath our trembling is an unquiet heart with a desire to feel, a will worn down

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by the struggle to stay and cope with the fear; a story that is broadly to do with other-people-as-threat. Heart, mind and will are involved in each of our varied anxieties. Calling it social anxiety may allow us to access expert help, but if the expertise is worthy of the name, it will, before it intervenes, understand the idiosyncratic workings of our particular *cases*. When it comes to breaking, we are all particular cases.

I work in an NHS trans-diagnostic fatigue clinic as a practitioner health psychologist. Trans-diagnostic here simply means that whatever your primary diagnosis – be it cancer or auto-immune or liver disease – you can be referred to our clinic if you also suffer from fatigue. I'm also a clinical academic, a Professor of Applied Health Psychology, researching the development of interventions to help people cope better with what life has thrown at them, be it 'physical' or 'mental' distress. Clinically, academically and personally, I have spent a lot of time trying to understand how we break and how we might mend. And one of the key things I have learned is that our breakdowns don't respect the divisions we have erected between the mental and the physical. Breaking is embodied. Breaking happens to the whole of us.

But research fields and therapeutic schools are often more focused on parts than wholes. Each branch tends to carve out their area of interest and looks for the cause and the cure within their specific purview. And when it comes to popularizing, simple stories are easier to tell and sell. For instance, there are many available stories about the causes of depression: it is caused by our early experience, by systemic inflammation, by our neurotransmitters, our microbiome, our faulty thinking, our behaviour, our relationships, our socioeconomic circumstances. Now of course some of these stories will be true for some people some of the time, but even then they will only capture one aspect of the experience and miss out, for instance, how these factors might interact, or how our economic circumstances will impact on all the other factors: our early environment, our immune system, our food choices and how we feel about ourselves and others. More recently there has been an

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attempt to work across disciplines: newer fields of study such as psychoneuroimmunology try to model the complexity of distress. Network and systems thinking tries to model how biological, psychological, social and economic factors can interact in 'real patterns',* the practitioners of these disciplines arguing that our disorders are composed of the ongoing interaction of these factors over time. But this is not only hard to tell as a story, it's also difficult as science. It requires cross-disciplinary working and co-operation within a field that is often competitive; the work of synthesis in a field that is more comfortable with analysis.

This lack of cross-disciplinary working also shows up in our highly specialized healthcare systems. As a result, the patients I see in the clinic are often having to do the work of synthesis for themselves, putting together the emotional and self-care advice from me, the physical rehab from someone else, their physical disease management from another, the benefits system advice from yet another. They are having to manage all these contributors to their healing or harming, but that health or harm is all happening to a unified whole. And within their struggling body their different organs and systems – their immune system, their autonomic nervous system, their microbiome, their microglia, their emotions and coping strategies – do not sit discretely within their separate kingdoms. They all communicate. We are a deeply enmeshed republic of physiological, emotional and symbolic systems whose interactions can be thrown into disorder with frightening ease. Our story about our struggles and our suffering needs to try to capture this complexity, and how it will show up differently in every case. That's the story I have set out to write.

To tell this tale of trembling and breaking I'll draw on my clinical work, my research, my own life and the lives of my family and friends. I'll combine them with insights and wisdom from the

* Denny Borsboom, Angélique O. J. Cramer and Annemarie Kalis, 'Brain disorders? Not really: Why network structures block reductionism in psychopathology research', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 42 (2019): e2.

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sciences, the humanities and popular culture. I want it to be useful, to help you and me get a better sense of why we sometimes struggle with life. Throughout, I'll gently prod you to use the tales of other people to reflect on your own. As I often see in the clinic, just understanding our suffering is in itself a helpful intervention. Understanding is often the beginning of self-compassion. It allows us to contain and manage our distress and to see it for what it is: not some innate fault or inadequacy, but a meeting of our faculties with circumstances that were, for a time, beyond them. One way or another, even if only in our final act, this will happen to us all. My hope is that understanding how the turbulence of life affects us might enable us to navigate its difficult straits with a little more ease.

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PART ONE

Trembling

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1.

Many Meetings

We open the book of you and me and consider our opening chapters. We try to do justice to the complexity of our origin stories. In Chapter 1.1 we look in detail at the formative impact of our meetings with our early locality and the people and things that populate it. We see that the place and time of our becoming is just as formative of our world as the people within it. Our singular individuality is shown to be a complex equation of many factors. In Chapter 1.2 we look at how we are shaped by the turning of the genetic wheel of fortune. This gives us the material stuff that we are made of and we see that some of us are born with more of a tendency to tremble than others. The totally random and utterly formative nature of the meeting of our unique constitution with our particular set of circumstances is considered. The highly specific nature of the outcome of this meeting is illustrated by the presentation of particular cases. Throughout, the reader is invited to reflect on their own case.

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I.I.

First Encounters



Opening Chapters

Tomorrow, Deary, I'm going to cut you in half.

Schoolgirl, Carluke, Scotland, 1975

Most of my early memories are of terror.

I remember hating transitions. Class to playtime, class to lunchtime, school to home. Dreading those straits where the agents of terror would waylay me. Even on the long, lonely, fearful and circuitous routes back home, even on the road taken to avoid them, they would be waiting, like trolls under bridges. People waiting around just to hurt me. Can you imagine? Maybe you can, maybe you even know how that feels. We're all a little more familiar with terror these days.

Exterior, School Playground, Carluke, Scotland, 1972. Fade up on a gentle (effeminate) nine-year-old boy who is making a rare attempt

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to play with another group of boys. 'That's poofy,' said the group's dominant male. I retreat in confusion and shame. He had a point, of course. I didn't talk or act like any of the other boys – or indeed anyone – at my school. They all had thick west coast Scottish accents; I talked like I was at posh school or came from a posh family. I wasn't, and I didn't. This was a working-class comprehensive school in lowland Scotland in the 1970s. Being gender non-conforming wasn't on the menu then. So, I was 'poofy'.

I was also usually near the top of the class, and in those days that was literal. We sat in single parallel rows that were ranked from front left to back right according to however our aptitude was measured. I was always top or near top left. As much as that was yet another thing that marked me as other, it also, eventually, helped. As our cohort moved from primary to secondary school, intelligence as a currency gained in value. It could sometimes buy you friends or freedom from persecution. But that was still a few years away for this poofy nine-year-old.

Mostly I hung out with the other misfits at school. There is always a group of those who don't belong to any other group. I remember either entertaining them, charming them, or making them feel okay. This was a set of skills I had learned to use to survive at home. Goodness knows what the others were playing at. Us rejects and freaks are very caught up in our own games. We are forced to think about ourselves a lot. Forced to manage ourselves in those situations where we don't fit in. If we fit, we don't have to manage; it's the fish out of water that struggle. Freaks have to learn to manage. We will always experience more resistance, more friction, more *turbulence*. And so we tremble more. Early on we experience a lot of difficult feelings and emotions, and we need to learn to manage them too, else break. Misfits are given back to themselves as *work*.

How about you, my unknown friend? How comfortably did you sit with your peers in those early years?

Sami is another case to compare notes with – we will introduce him more fully in the next chapter. Another misfit who became

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aware of himself definitively early, around the age of seven, as an object of desire and abuse for men and older boys. He had to learn how to suck their cocks. One of the men rewarded him for this and bought his silence by giving him a hand-carved toy animal every time they met. Eventually Sami had collected a menagerie that he used to spend hours playing with. The only part of this story that makes him sad as he tells it to me is what happened the day his family moved house. The wooden zoo was just suddenly gone. I form an image as he talks. There was, in the old house, a quiet upper room with a high shelf where he kept the toys. For a gentle boy, easily worn out by others, this room was a private space of play in a noisy and bustling South Indian family, a sanctuary made doubly private by the provenance of the toys he kept there. It was an oasis of peace begat by the storm. And then the sadness the day they were just gone, lost in the move.

It was a double privation: the loss of the animals and the inexplicableness of the weight and meaning of their loss. He's trying to explain it to me now. It is one of those moments where my well-honed ability to enter into the world of the other left me profoundly moved. It was a weird kind of honour to be with him in that moment of profound *loneliness*. This, more than the abuse, was a definitive experience of aloneness for him, of not being able to explain to the family that surrounded him what it meant that these toys were gone. Now, as an adult, this loneliness is still a place he goes to, a permanent feature of his being. He will still take himself to his room and cry on his own when life is overwhelming. This is how he learned to manage.

And you? How did you learn to manage? What did life inscribe in your opening chapters that you can still see underwriting the rules and rhythms of your present day?

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First Impressions

> Every time these encounters are lasting rather than ephemeral, a world is born.
>
> Louis Althusser, 'Philosophy and Marxism'*

We are a record of our prolonged encounter with the world. But this record is also largely obscure to us precisely because it is embodied as habit, as just who we are now. This unique book which is within each of us, which *is* each of us, is the central preoccupation of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

> That book, the most painful of all to decipher, is also the only one dictated to us by reality, the only one whose 'impression' has been made in us by reality itself.†

As we move forward into our futures, as we try to engage with them and rise to the challenge of new demands or crises, we take our legacy with us. We bring our old habits and stories to new situations, no matter how poorly they serve us. We are dogged by our legacy. The Fool in the Tarot tradition has no legacy, they are an absolute beginner. This is why their assigned value is zero, nothing has been written in their book yet. The Fool has no 'was', no inescapable legacy of pain, fear, damage, heartbreak, terror, nothing dogging their steps, nothing to tell them what to approach or avoid; they just *are*, completely open to life. The Fool walks forward into the world without fear or favour.

But not us. As we bring our old stories to new encounters, we feel the resistance. Uncomfortable feelings are the friction between our

* In Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978–87* (ed. F. Matheron and O. Corpet, trans. G. M. Goshgarian: Verso, 2006).

† Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Finding Time Again* (trans. Ian Patterson: Penguin, 2003).

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old book and the new world. 'I hate feelings,' said my daughter Vicky recently, with comedy but also heartfelt vehemence. But they are the cost of doing business, the turbulence of the journey. They are life making its impression upon us.

We don't choose our first encounters, but they are definitive of us and our world. When you met your family and your circumstances, a world began, a world that is entirely your own. How did your early climate shape the working of your heart, mind and will? In the opening chapters of the book of us, we are shaped by much more than just our immediate family. We are born incomplete. As neuroscientist David Eagleman argues in his book *Live Wired*, our nervous systems are born ready to receive the imprint of the culture, language and values of our locality. It is the fundamental plasticity of human beings that means we are able to adapt to almost any earthly environment. Indeed, more than adapt to it, we become a living expression of it. Malleable things that we are, we embody the place of our growth as a grape does its *terroir*, the ground and climate of its growing.

We are made from our meeting with the *place and time* of our becoming as much as the people we meet there. It's a harder thing to see the place's influence though, because the tools we use to try to see it are the tools we get from it. This is the very definition of *availability bias*: our innate tendency to base our worldview on the stuff that is immediately to hand, the things we see and hear every day. That's *the* world to us, not *a* world. The poet Wallace Stevens put it like this in his poem 'Theory':

> I am what is around me

Also observing in *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*:

> we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves

The apparent contradiction in these statements is resolved when we realize that *we are composed from what is not us*. We are a *bricolage* of

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what is to hand in the place and time of our formation. Psychological origin stories tend to focus on the influence of one or two main characters, usually the parents, often ignoring other players and the setting entirely, but these are key variables that need to be accounted for in the story of our becoming.

Complex Equations

I end up owing my soul to so many

Sharon Olds, 'Mrs Krikorian'

We live in worlds of our own. Our formative encounters lay the foundations of those worlds. To tell the tale of how they do, we must try to do justice to our individual cases and at the same time try to see the more general laws of world building that we are all subject to. The origin stories we tell about ourselves are often rather simple tales. The multiple mess of our becoming is reduced to the actions and intentions of a few familial variables. In the classic Freudian story, our relationships to our parents often bear the explanatory load. It's like the 'great man theory' of history, the simple story that historical events are shaped by a few significant individuals. But of course in the becoming of history, and the origin of us, it's really not that simple:

> Only by taking infinitesimally small units for observation (the differential of history, that is, the individual tendencies of men) and attaining to the art of integrating them (that is, finding the sum of these infinitesimals) can we hope to arrive at the laws of history.*

In my own becoming I see much more at work than just the parental configuration. A lot of my significant encounters happened outside of the home. For Sami too. My genetics and setup at home

* Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (trans. L. and A. Maude. W. W. Norton, 1966).

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might have given me a valence for terror and alarm, but school established its reign within my being. We all owe our souls to so many, but this is not an easy story to tell. However, in the last few years in psychological and medical research there has been a renewed interest in the *case*, in the idiosyncratic way disease, distress and recovery manifest in a given individual. The case history is, of course, the *sine qua non* of psychoanalytic therapy. By a prolonged and detailed focus on the story of individual cases, the early analysts sought to derive universal laws of human being and breaking.

This approach illustrates the two ends of the research continuum. At one end there are the studies of large numbers of people that are designed to derive universal laws that apply to all people. This is known as nomothetic research, derived from the Greek word *nomos*, meaning 'law'. At the other extreme is the detailed study of a single or a few individuals, aiming to specify what is the case for each, to hear their unique stories. This is known as idiographic research, from *idios*, meaning 'one's own' or 'private'. This latter approach of gathering rich data from a few individuals is undergoing something of a renaissance in mainstream science, and it is often when the two approaches complement each other that we can really understand the complexity of our human life.

For instance, we saw in the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic how the same pathogenic agent – the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – could produce wildly different cases of disease. Like us, the virus's self-expression was determined by whom it encountered. The virus, when it met us, didn't just meet another identikit human body, it met a unique individual, with a unique constitution and a unique life history in a unique set of socioeconomic circumstances. It was in the meeting of those multiple interacting factors that a specific *case* of Covid-19 emerged. Only more idiographic research can tell us what factors make cases vary so widely, and how treatment will need to be tailored to each case. This idiographic understanding and tailoring are what psychological and medical sciences have become more focused on in the last couple of decades. There is a move towards *personalized medicine* and *precision psychiatry*, based on a recognition that the diagnostic

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category – be it Covid-19, diabetes, stress, social anxiety or depression – will manifest differently in different individuals. As such, we need differently weighted interventions to write and solve our complex equations. In therapy-speak, we expect our treatment to be based on an individualized formulation, on what is the case for us.

In a letter to a friend struggling with her own distress and seeing it reflected in those around her, Henry James advises her against becoming too transfixed by a story about life as a universal tragedy:

> Only don't, I beseech you, generalize too much in these sympathies and tendernesses – remember that every life is a special problem which is not yours but another's, and content yourself with the terrible algebra of your own.*

To do justice to your own unique, complex and terrible algebra, to see what factors composed your idioverse – your own world – I would encourage you to see beyond the usual suspects. See what else was the case for you in those opening chapters, what other variables entered into your equation.

In my origin story, I met Carluke, Scotland, 1963–1981, its people, places and things. This is the ground I fell and tried to thrive on. I got given a name. As Marshall McLuhan observed, a person's name is 'a blow they will never recover from'. Mine was Vincent Arron Vernon Adrian Hugo Deary. This is not the kind of name you heard in working-class towns in Scotland in the 1960s. And this flesh I was heir to grew to have problematic features. I had a big nose. In and of itself this is just part of my breathing and sensing apparatus. This name and this nose are just incidentals, but nevertheless they became definitive, became two key variables in my terrible algebra. Both name and nose were taken from me and given back through the mediation of my peer group and its culture. My nose got taken from me and given back as 'Concorde!'. My name got taken from me and given back as ridiculous. My gentle manner and soft, posh

* Henry James, *Selected Letters* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

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