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MATTHEW D'ANCONA

DAVID BROOKS

HOW TO KNOW A PERSON

The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen

PENGUIN BOOKS

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David Brooks is a columnist for *The New York Times* and frequent broadcaster. His previous books include the bestsellers *The Social Animal* and *Bobos in Paradise*. His *New York Times* columns reach over 800,000 readers across the globe.

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To Peter Marks

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Part 1

I SEE YOU

ONE

The Power of Being Seen

If you ever saw the old movie *Fiddler on the Roof,* you know how warm and emotional Jewish families can be. They are always hugging, singing, dancing, laughing, and crying together.

I come from the other kind of Jewish family.

The culture of my upbringing could be summed up by the phrase "Think Yiddish, act British." We were reserved, stiff-upper-lip types. I'm not saying I had a bad childhood—far from it. Home was a stimulating place for me, growing up. Over our Thanksgiving dinner tables, we talked about the history of Victorian funerary monuments and the evolutionary sources of lactose intolerance (I'm not kidding). There was love in the home. We just didn't express it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I became a bit detached. When I was four, my nursery school teacher apparently told my parents, "David

doesn't always play with the other children. A lot of the time he stands off to the side and *observes* them." Whether it was nature or nurture, a certain aloofness became part of my personality. By high school I had taken up long-term residency inside my own head. I felt most alive when I was engaged in the solitary business of writing. Junior year I wanted to date a woman named Bernice. But after doing some intel gathering, I discovered she wanted to go out with another guy. I was shocked. I remember telling myself, "What is she *thinking*? I write way better than that guy!" It's quite possible that I had a somewhat constrained view of how social life worked for most people.

Then, when I was eighteen, the admissions officers at Columbia, Wesleyan, and Brown decided I should go to the University of Chicago. I love my alma mater, and it has changed a lot for the better since I was there, but back then it wasn't exactly the sort of get-in-touch-with-your-feelings place that would help thaw my emotional ice age. My favorite saying about Chicago is this one: It's a Baptist school where atheist professors teach Jewish students Saint Thomas Aquinas. The students there still wear T-shirts that read, "Sure it works in practice, but does it work in theory?" And so into this heady world I traipsed and . . . shocker, I fit right in.

If you had met me ten years out of college, I think you would have found me a pleasant enough guy, cheerful but a tad inhibited—not somebody who was easy to get to know or who found it easy to get to know you. In truth, I was a practiced escape artist. When other people revealed some vulnerable intimacy to me, I was good at making meaningful eye contact with their shoes and then excusing myself to keep a vitally important appointment with my dry cleaner. I had a sense that this wasn't an ideal way of

being. I felt painfully awkward during those moments when someone tried to connect with me. I inwardly wanted to connect. I just didn't know what to say.

Repressing my own feelings became my default mode for moving through the world. I suppose I was driven by the usual causes: fear of intimacy; an intuition that if I really let my feelings flow, I wouldn't like what bubbled up; a fear of vulnerability; and a general social ineptitude. One seemingly small and stupid episode symbolizes this repressed way of living for me. I'm a big baseball fan, and though I have been to hundreds of games, I have never once caught a foul ball in the stands. One day about fifteen years ago, I was at a game in Baltimore when a hitter's bat shattered, and the whole bat except the knob helicoptered over the dugout and landed at my feet. I reached down and grabbed it. Getting a bat at a game is a thousand times better than getting a ball! I should have been jumping up and down, waving my trophy in the air, high-fiving the people around me, becoming a temporary jumbotron celebrity. Instead, I just placed the bat at my feet and sat, still-faced, as everyone stared at me. Looking back, I want to scream at myself: "Show a little joy!" But when it came to spontaneous displays of emotion, I had the emotional capacity of a head of cabbage.

Life has a way of tenderizing you, though. Becoming a father was an emotional revolution, of course. Later, I absorbed my share of the blows that any adult suffers: broken relationships, public failures, the vulnerability that comes with getting older. The ensuing sense of my own frailty was good for me, introducing me to deeper, repressed parts of myself.

Another seemingly small event symbolizes the beginning of my ongoing journey toward becoming a full human being. As a com-

mentator and pundit, I sometimes get asked to sit on panel discussions. Usually, they are at Washington think tanks and they have exactly as much emotional ardor as you'd expect from a discussion of fiscal policy. (As the journalist Meg Greenfield once observed, Washington isn't filled with the wild kids who stuck the cat in the dryer; it's filled with the kind of kids who tattled on the kids who stuck the cat in the dryer.) But on this particular day, I was invited to appear on a panel at the Public Theater in New York, the company that would later launch the musical *Hamilton*. I think we were supposed to talk about the role of the arts in public life. The actress Anne Hathaway was on the panel with me, along with a hilarious and highbrow clown named Bill Irwin and a few others. At this panel, D.C. think-tank rules didn't apply. Backstage, before the panel, everybody was cheering each other on. We gathered for a big group hug. We charged out into the theater filled with camaraderie and purpose. Hathaway sang a moving song. There were tissues on the stage in case anybody started crying. The other panelists started emoting things. They talked about magical moments when they were undone, transported, or transformed by some artwork or play. Even I started emoting things! As my hero Samuel Johnson might have said, it was like watching a walrus trying to figure skate—it wasn't good, but you were impressed that you were seeing it at all. Then, after the panel, we celebrated with another group hug. I thought, "This is fantastic! I've got to be around theater people more!" I vowed to alter my life.

Yes, I'm the guy who had his life changed by a panel discussion.

Okay, it was a *little* more gradual than that. But over the years I came to realize that living in a detached way is, in fact, a withdrawal from life, an estrangement not just from other people but

from yourself. So I struck out on a journey. We writers work out our stuff in public, of course, so I wrote books on emotion, moral character, and spiritual growth. And it kind of worked. Over the years, I altered my life. I made myself more vulnerable with people and more emotionally expressive in public. I tried to become the sort of person people would confide in—talk with me about their divorces, their grief over the death of their spouse, worries about their kids. Gradually, things began to change inside. I had these novel experiences: "What are these tinglings in my chest? Oh, they're *feelings*!" One day, I'm dancing at a concert: "Feelings are great!" Another day, I'm sad that my wife is away on a trip: "Feelings suck!" My life goals changed, too. When I was young, I wanted to be knowledgeable, but as I got older, I wanted to be wise. Wise people don't just possess information; they possess a compassionate understanding of other people. They know about life.

I'm not an exceptional person, but I am a grower. I do have the ability to look at my shortcomings, then try to prod myself into becoming a more fully developed human being. I've made progress over these years. Wait, I can prove this to you! Twice in my life I've been lucky enough to have appeared on Oprah's show *Super Soul Sunday,* once in 2015 and once in 2019. After we were done taping the second interview, Oprah came up to me and said, "I've rarely seen someone change so much. You were so blocked before." That was a proud moment for me. I mean, she should know—she's Oprah.

I learned something profound along the way. Being open-hearted is a prerequisite for being a full, kind, and wise human being. But it is not enough. People need social skills. We talk about

the importance of "relationships," "community," "friendship," "social connection," but these words are too abstract. The real act of, say, building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete social actions well: disagreeing without poisoning the relationship; revealing vulnerability at the appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to end a conversation gracefully; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to let someone down without breaking their heart; knowing how to sit with someone who is suffering; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another's point of view.

These are some of the most important skills a human being can possess, and yet we don't teach them in school. Some days it seems like we have intentionally built a society that gives people little guidance on how to perform the most important activities of life. As a result, a lot of us are lonely and lack deep friendships. It's not because we don't want these things. Above almost any other need, human beings long to have another person look into their face with loving respect and acceptance. It's that we lack practical knowledge about how to give each other the kind of rich attention we desire. I'm not sure Western societies were ever great at teaching these skills, but over the past several decades, in particular, there's been a loss of moral knowledge. Our schools and other institutions have focused more and more on preparing people for their careers, but not on the skills of being considerate toward the person next to you. The humanities, which teach us what goes on in the minds of other people, have become marginalized. And a life spent on social media is not exactly helping people learn these skills. On social media you can have the illusion of social contact

without having to perform the gestures that actually build trust, care, and affection. On social media, stimulation replaces intimacy. There is judgment everywhere and understanding nowhere.

In this age of creeping dehumanization, I've become obsessed with social skills: how to get better at treating people with consideration; how to get better at understanding the people right around us. I've come to believe that the quality of our lives and the health of our society depends, to a large degree, on how well we treat each other in the minute interactions of daily life.

And all these different skills rest on one foundational skill: the ability to understand what another person is going through. There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen—to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard, and understood.

That is at the heart of being a good person, the ultimate gift you can give to others and to yourself.

Human beings need recognition as much as they need food and water. No crueler punishment can be devised than to *not* see someone, to render them unimportant or invisible. "The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them," George Bernard Shaw wrote, "but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." To do that is to say: You don't matter. You don't exist.

On the other hand, there are few things as fulfilling as that sense of being seen and understood. I often ask people to tell me about times they've felt seen, and with glowing eyes they tell me

stories about pivotal moments in their life. They talk about a time when someone perceived some talent in them that they themselves weren't even able to see. They talk about a time when somebody understood exactly what they needed at some exhausted moment—and stepped in, in just the right way, to lighten the load.

Over the past four years I've become determined to learn the skills that go into seeing others, understandings others, making other people feel respected, valued, and safe. First, I've wanted to understand and learn these skills for pragmatic reasons. You can't make the big decisions in life well unless you're able to understand others. If you are going to marry someone, you have to know not just about that person's looks, interests, and career prospects but how the pains of their childhood show up in their adulthood, whether their deepest longings align with your own. If you're going to hire someone, you have to be able to see not just the qualities listed on their résumé but the subjective parts of their consciousness, the parts that make some people try hard or feel comfortable with uncertainty, calm in a crisis, or generous to colleagues. If you're going to retain someone in your company, you have to know how to make them feel appreciated. In a 2021 study, McKinsey asked managers why their employees were quitting their firms. Most of the managers believed that people were leaving to get more pay. But when the McKinsey researchers asked the employees themselves why they'd left, the top reasons were relational. They didn't feel recognized and valued by their managers and organizations. They didn't feel seen.

And if this ability to truly see others is important in making the marriage decision or in hiring and retaining workers, it is also important if you are a teacher leading students, a doctor examining

patients, a host anticipating the needs of a guest, a friend spending time with a friend, a parent raising a child, a spouse watching the one you love crawl into bed at the end of the day. Life goes a lot better if you can see things from other people's points of view, as well as your own. "Artificial intelligence is going to do many things for us in the decades ahead, and replace humans at many tasks, but one thing it will never be able to do is to create person-to-person connections. If you want to thrive in the age of AI, you better become exceptionally good at connecting with others."

Second, I wanted to learn this skill for what I think of as spiritual reasons. Seeing someone well is a powerfully creative act. No one can fully appreciate their own beauty and strengths unless those things are mirrored back to them in the mind of another. There is something in being seen that brings forth growth. If you beam the light of your attention on me, I blossom. If you see great potential in me, I will probably come to see great potential in myself. If you can understand my frailties and sympathize with me when life treats me harshly, then I am more likely to have the strength to weather the storms of life. "The roots of resilience," the psychologist Diana Fosha writes, "are to be found in the sense of being understood by and existing in the mind and heart of a loving, attuned, and self-possessed other." In how you see me, I will learn to see myself.

And third, I wanted to learn this skill for what I guess you'd call reasons of national survival. Human beings evolved to live in small bands with people more or less like themselves. But today, many of us live in wonderfully pluralistic societies. In America, Europe, India, and many other places, we're trying to build mass multicultural democracies, societies that contain people from di-

verse races and ethnicities, with different ideologies and backgrounds. To survive, pluralistic societies require citizens who can look across difference and show the kind of understanding that is a prerequisite of trust—who can say, at the very least, "I'm beginning to see you. Certainly, I will never fully experience the world as you experience it, but I'm beginning, a bit, to see the world through your eyes."

Our social skills are currently inadequate to the pluralistic societies we are living in. In my job as a journalist, I often find myself interviewing people who tell me they feel invisible and disrespected: Black people feeling that the systemic inequities that afflict their daily experiences are not understood by whites, rural people feeling they are not seen by coastal elites, people across political divides staring at each other with angry incomprehension, depressed young people feeling misunderstood by their parents and everyone else, privileged people blithely unaware of all the people around them cleaning their houses and serving their needs, husbands and wives in broken marriages who realize that the person who should know them best actually has no clue. Many of our big national problems arise from the fraying of our social fabric. If we want to begin repairing the big national ruptures, we have to learn to do the small things well.

In every crowd there are Diminishers and there are Illuminators. Diminishers make people feel small and unseen. They see other people as things to be used, not as persons to be befriended. They stereotype and ignore. They are so involved with themselves that other people are just not on their radar screen.

Illuminators, on the other hand, have a persistent curiosity about other people. They have been trained or have trained themselves in the craft of understanding others. They know what to look for and how to ask the right questions at the right time. They shine the brightness of their care on people and make them feel bigger, deeper, respected, lit up.

I'm sure you've experienced a version of this: You meet somebody who seems wholly interested in you, who gets you, who helps you name and see things in yourself that maybe you hadn't even yet put into words, and you become a better version of yourself.

A biographer of the novelist E. M. Forster wrote, "To speak to him was to be seduced by an inverse charisma, a sense of being listened to with such intensity that you had to be your most honest, sharpest, and best self." Imagine how good it would be to be that guy.

Perhaps you know the story that is sometimes told of Jennie Jerome, who later became Winston Churchill's mother. It's said that when she was young, she dined with the British statesman William Gladstone and left thinking he was the cleverest person in England. Later she dined with Gladstone's great rival, Benjamin Disraeli, and left that dinner thinking *she* was the cleverest person in England. It's nice to be like Gladstone, but it's better to be like Disraeli.

Or consider a story from Bell Labs. Many years ago, executives there realized that some of their researchers were far more productive, and amassed many more patents, than the others. Why was this? they wondered. They wanted to know what made these researchers so special. They explored every possible explanation—educational background, position in the company—but came up

empty. Then they noticed a quirk. The most productive researchers were in the habit of having breakfast or lunch with an electrical engineer named Harry Nyquist. Aside from making important contributions to communications theory, Nyquist, the scientists said, really listened to their challenges, got inside their heads, asked good questions, and brought out the best in them. In other words, Nyquist was an Illuminator.

So what are you most of the time, a Diminisher or an Illuminator? How good are you at reading other people?

I probably don't know you personally, but I can make the following statement with a high degree of confidence: You're not as good as you think you are. We all go through our days awash in social ignorance. William Ickes, a leading scholar on how accurate people are at perceiving what other people are thinking, finds that strangers who are in the midst of their first conversation read each other accurately only about 20 percent of the time and close friends and family members do so only 35 percent of the time. Ickes rates his research subjects on a scale of "empathic accuracy" from 0 to 100 percent and finds great variation from person to person. Some people get a zero rating. When they are in conversation with someone they've just met, they have no clue what the other person is actually thinking. But other people are pretty good at reading others and score around 55 percent. (The problem is that people who are terrible at reading others think they are just as good as those who are pretty accurate.) Intriguingly, Ickes finds that the longer many couples are married, the less accurate they are at reading each other. They lock in some early version of who their spouse is, and over the years, as the other person changes, that version stays

fixed—and they know less and less about what's actually going on in the other's heart and mind.

You don't have to rely on an academic study to know that this is true. How often in your life have you felt stereotyped and categorized? How often have you felt prejudged, invisible, misheard, or misunderstood? Do you really think you don't do this to others on a daily basis?

The purpose of this book is to help us become more skilled at the art of seeing others and making them feel seen, heard, and understood. When I started research on this subject, I had no clue what this skill consisted of. But I did know that exceptional people in many fields had taught themselves versions of this skill. Psychologists are trained to see the defenses people build up to protect themselves from their deepest fears. Actors can identify the core traits of a character and teach themselves to inhabit the role. Biographers can notice the contradictions in a person and yet see a life whole. Teachers can spot potential. Skilled talk show and podcast hosts know how to get people to open up and be their true selves. There are so many professions in which the job is to see, anticipate, and understand people: nursing, the ministry, management, social work, marketing, journalism, editing, HR, and on and on. My goal was to gather some of the knowledge that is dispersed across these professions and integrate it into a single practical approach.

So I embarked on a journey toward greater understanding, a journey on which I still have a long, long way to go. I gradually realized that trying to deeply know and understand others is not

just about mastering some set of techniques; it's a way of life. It's like what actors who have gone to acting school experience: When they're onstage, they're not thinking about the techniques they learned in school. They've internalized them, so it is now just part of who they are. I'm hoping this book will help you adopt a different posture toward other people, a different way of being present with people, a different way of having bigger conversations. Living this way can yield the deepest pleasures.

One day, not long ago, I was reading a dull book at my dining room table when I looked up and saw my wife framed in the front doorway of our house. The door was open. The late afternoon light was streaming in around her. Her mind was elsewhere, but her gaze was resting on a white orchid that we kept in a pot on a table by the door.

I paused, and looked at her with a special attention, and had a strange and wonderful awareness ripple across my mind: "I *know* her," I thought. "I really know her, through and through."

If you had asked what it was exactly that I knew about her in that moment, I would have had trouble answering. It wasn't any collection of facts about her, or her life story, or even something expressible in the words I'd use to describe her to a stranger. It was the whole flowing of her being—the incandescence of her smile, the undercurrent of her insecurities, the rare flashes of fierceness, the vibrancy of her spirit. It was the lifts and harmonies of her music.

I wasn't seeing pieces of her or having specific memories. What I saw, or felt I saw, was the wholeness of her. How her consciousness creates her reality. It's what happens when you've been with someone for a while, endured and delighted together, and slowly

grown an intuitive sense for how that person feels and responds. It might even be accurate to say that for a magical moment I wasn't seeing her, I was seeing out from her. Perhaps to really know another person, you have to have a glimmer of how they experience the world. To really know someone, you have to know how they know you.

The only word I can think of in the English language that captures my mental processes at that instant is "beholding." She was at the door, the light blazing in behind her, and I was beholding her. They say there is no such thing as an ordinary person. When you're beholding someone, you're seeing the richness of this particular human consciousness, the full symphony—how they perceive and create their life.

I don't have to tell you how delicious that moment felt—warm, intimate, profound. It was the bliss of human connection. "A lot of brilliant writers and thinkers don't have any sense for how people operate," the therapist and author Mary Pipher once told me. "To be able to understand people and be present for them in their experience—that's the most important thing in the world."

TWO

How Not to See a Person

A few years ago, I was sitting at a bar near my home in Washington, D.C. If you'd been there that evening, you might have looked at me and thought, "Sad guy drinking alone." I would call it "diligent scholar reporting on the human condition." I was nursing my bourbon, checking out the people around me. Because the bar was in D.C., there were three guys at a table behind me talking about elections and swing states. The man with his laptop at the table next to them looked like a junior IT officer who worked for a defense contractor. He had apparently acquired his wardrobe from the garage sale after the filming of *Napoleon Dynamite*. Down the bar there was a couple gazing deeply into their phones. Right next to me was a couple apparently on a first date, with the guy droning on about himself while staring at a spot on the wall about six feet over his date's head. As his monologue

hit its tenth minute, I sensed that she was silently praying that she might spontaneously combust, so at least this date could be over. I felt the sudden urge to grab the guy by the nose and scream, "For the love of God—just once ask her a question!" I think this impulse of mine was justified, but I'm not proud of it.

In short, everybody had their eyes open, and nobody seemed to be seeing each other. We were all, in one way or another, acting like Diminishers. And in truth, I was the worst of them, because I was doing that thing I do: the size-up. The size-up is what you do when you first meet someone: You check out their look, and you immediately start making judgments about them. I was studying the bartender's Chinese-character tattoos and drawing all sorts of conclusions about her sad singer/indie rock musical tastes. I used to make a living doing this. Just over two decades ago I wrote a book called *Bobos in Paradise*. Doing research for that book, I followed people around places like the clothing and furniture store Anthropologie, watching them thumb through nubby Peruvian shawls. I'd case people's kitchens, checking out the Aga stove that looked like a nickel-plated nuclear reactor right next to their massive Sub-Zero fridge, because apparently mere zero wasn't cold enough for them. I'd make some generalizations and riff on the cultural trends.

I'm proud of that book. But now I'm after bigger game. I'm bored with making generalizations about groups. I want to see people deeply, one by one. You'd think this would be kind of easy. You open your eyes, direct your gaze, and see them. But most of us have all sorts of inborn proclivities that prevent us from perceiving others accurately. The tendency to do the instant size-up is just one of the Diminisher tricks. Here are a few others:

EGOTISM. The number one reason people don't see others is that they are too self-centered to try. I can't see you because I'm all about myself. Let *me* tell *you* my opinion. Let me entertain you with this story about myself. Many people are unable to step outside of their own points of view. They are simply not curious about other people.

ANXIETY. The number two reason people don't see others is that they have so much noise in their own heads, they can't hear what's going on in other heads. *How am I coming across? I don't think this person really likes me. What am I going to say next to appear clever?* Fear is the enemy of open communication.

NAÏVE REALISM. This is the assumption that the way the world appears to you is the objective view, and therefore everyone else must see the same reality you do. People in the grip of naïve realism are so locked into their own perspective, they can't appreciate that other people have very different perspectives. You may have heard the old story about a man by a river. A woman standing on the opposite shore shouts to him: "How do I get to the other side of the river?" And the man shouts back: "You *are* on the other side of the river!"

THE LESSER-MINDS PROBLEM. University of Chicago psychologist Nicholas Epley points out that in day-to-day life we have access to the many thoughts that run through our own minds. But we don't have access to all the thoughts that are running through other people's minds. We just have access to the tiny portion they speak out loud. This leads to the perception that I am much more

complicated than you—deeper, more interesting, more subtle, and more high-minded. To demonstrate this phenomenon, Epley asked his business school students why they were going into business. The common answer was "I care about doing something worthwhile." When he asked them why they thought other students at the school were going into business, they commonly replied, "For the money." You know, because other people have lesser motivations . . . and lesser minds.

OBJECTIVISM. This is what market researchers, pollsters, and social scientists do. They observe behavior, design surveys, and collect data on people. This is a great way to understand the trends among populations of people, but it's a terrible way to see an individual person. If you adopt this detached, dispassionate, and objective stance, it's hard to see the most important parts of that person, her unique subjectivity—her imagination, sentiments, desires, creativity, intuitions, faith, emotions, and attachments—the cast of this unique person's inner world.

Over the course of my life, I've read hundreds of books by academic researchers who conduct studies to better understand human nature, and I've learned an enormous amount. I've also read hundreds of memoirs and spoken with thousands of people about their own singular lives, and I'm here to tell you that each particular life is far more astounding and unpredictable than any of the generalizations scholars and social scientists make about groups of people. If you want to understand humanity, you have to focus on the thoughts and emotions of individuals, not just data about groups.

ESSENTIALISM. People belong to groups, and there's a natural human tendency to make generalizations about them: Germans are orderly, Californians are laid-back. These generalizations occasionally have some basis in reality. But they are all false to some degree, and they are all hurtful to some degree. Essentialists don't recognize this. Essentialists are quick to use stereotypes to categorize vast swaths of people. Essentialism is the belief that certain groups actually have an "essential" and immutable nature. Essentialists imagine that people in one group are more alike than they really are. They imagine that people in other groups are more different from "us" than they really are. Essentialists are guilty of "stacking." This is the practice of learning one thing about a person, then making a whole series of further assumptions about that person. If this person supported Donald Trump, then this person must also be like this, this, this, and this.

THE STATIC MINDSET. Some people formed a certain conception of you, one that may even have been largely accurate at some point in time. But then you grew up. You changed profoundly. And those people never updated their models to see you now for who you really are. If you're an adult who has gone home to stay with your parents and realized that they still think of you as the child you no longer are, you know exactly what I'm talking about.

I'm breaking out these Diminisher proclivities to emphasize that seeing another person well is the hardest of all hard problems. Each person is a fathomless mystery, and you have only an outside view of who they are. The second point I'm trying to make is this:

The untrained eye is not enough. You'd never think of trying to fly a plane without going to flight school. Seeing another person well is even harder than that. If you and I are relying on our untrained ways of encountering others, we won't be seeing each other as deeply as we should. We'll lead our lives awash in social ignorance, enmeshed in relationships of mutual blindness. We'll count ourselves among the millions of emotional casualties: husbands and wives who don't really see each other, parents and children who don't really know each other, colleagues at work who might as well live in different galaxies.

It's disturbingly easy to be ignorant of the person right next to you. As you'll discover over the course of this book, I like to teach through examples, so let me tell you about a case that illustrates how you can think you know someone well without really knowing them. It's from Vivian Gornick's classic 1987 memoir *Fierce Attachments*. Gornick was thirteen when her father died of a heart attack, and her mother, Bess, was forty-six. Bess had always enjoyed the status of seeming to be the one woman in her working-class Bronx apartment building in a happy, loving marriage. Her husband's death undid her. At the funeral parlor she tried to climb into the coffin with him. At the cemetery she tried to throw herself into the open grave. For years after she would be deranged by paroxysms of grief, suddenly thrashing around on the floor, veins bulging, sweat flying.

"My mother's grief was primitive and all-encompassing: it sucked the oxygen out of the air," Gornick wrote in that memoir. Her mother's grief consumed everybody else's grief, gathered the world's attention on her, and reduced her children to props in her drama. Afraid to sleep alone, Bess would pull Vivian close, but