

## **When Survival Is Not Enough**

### **On What Must Remain — and What Must Be Allowed to Change**

In a crisis, life becomes narrower.

This is not always visible. You continue to get up, answer messages, meet obligations and appear where you are expected. Bills are paid. Appointments are kept. Decisions are made. From the outside, such a life may seem almost unchanged.

Inside, it begins to organise itself around what is necessary.

You answer the message that cannot be left unanswered and leave the other one unread. You take the shortest route because a detour suddenly feels like an unnecessary expenditure of strength. Whatever is not immediately needed begins to recede. This includes things you know belong to a life: rest, curiosity, closeness, a possibility without an obvious purpose.

At first, this narrowing is not a failure. It may help someone endure a difficult period. Under pressure, a person has to distinguish, concentrate their strength and postpone certain things. Not everything can be preserved at once.

For a time, this may be exactly what carries them.

The difficulty begins when the order created by an emergency remains in place after the immediate danger has passed. Life is functioning again, but it has become accustomed to a form in which less and less is allowed to occur. What helped someone survive a crisis begins to determine what can still appear possible afterward.

I know the moment when almost everything continues and, precisely because it does, another question begins to emerge. No longer only: How do I get through the next day? But: What remains of a life when all its strength is being used to preserve its existing form?

Survival initially answers a clear question. Something does not end.

But avoiding an ending and remaining alive are not the same thing.

A person may continue to work, accept responsibility and remain dependable for others while losing any sense that their actions still lead somewhere. An institution may remain open, submit reports and follow its procedures while doing little more than administer what it already knows. A society may stabilise itself by repeatedly assigning pressure to the same people or by moving its costs into a future that has no part in present decisions.

In each case, something continues. It may even function reliably. That alone does not tell us what has been preserved.

By aliveness, I do not mean happiness or growth. Nor do I mean that a person or a society should constantly reinvent itself. Much of what matters gains its value through reliability. A promise means something because it is not renegotiated every morning. A procedure can protect people because it does not depend on the will of the moment. A shared world needs forms on which we can rely.

A world in which everything remained open at all times would hardly be inhabitable.

Remaining alive must therefore involve more than openness or change. Perhaps it means possessing a form without becoming entirely trapped inside it. Preserving experience without

merely repeating it. Setting priorities under pressure without turning what was temporary into a permanent order. Still being able to respond when reality has changed.

What appears in an individual life as a concentration on the immediate takes a different form within institutions.

When resources become scarce, vacant positions are not filled, timeframes are shortened and overlapping responsibilities are removed. Activities whose results cannot be shown immediately are the first to come under pressure to justify themselves. Training can wait. A second person who understands a process seems unnecessary as long as the first is still there. Time in which nothing measurable appears to happen begins to look like unused capacity.

At first, this may seem convincing. Processes become faster, responsibilities clearer, measurable output greater.

An archive, for example, might decide to concentrate on cataloguing the collections people already ask for most frequently. More visitors find what they are looking for, and they find it more quickly. Usage rises. The figures improve.

Material that does not yet possess a recognised name remains untouched.

It has not disappeared. It may still be lying in the same boxes in the same building. But it becomes increasingly difficult for a later public even to discover that it exists. The archive functions more successfully while losing part of its ability to preserve something whose significance has not yet been established.

The loss first appears as efficiency.

Only later does it become clear that more than the unnecessary has been removed. Spaces have also disappeared in which an error might be noticed, knowledge passed on or an unexpected possibility recognised. What secures an institution's continuation in the short term may weaken its ability to respond to something that was never included in the plan.

This is not an argument for treating every reserve as untouchable. Inertia can disguise itself as caution. A procedure is not meaningful simply because it has existed for a long time, and duplicated responsibility is not always a sign of resilience. The difficulty is that, at the moment something is removed, it is rarely possible to know with certainty what is truly dispensable and what appears dispensable only because its value would become visible later.

An order may become more productive while losing something that cannot be measured in its present performance: the possibility of responding differently.

That possibility is also distributed unevenly between people.

A path may be formally open and still be almost impossible to choose. What is missing may not be permission but money, time or the confidence that one could return after failure. On paper, the possibility exists. In a person's life, it may remain almost unreachable.

A year without a clear direction may be a period of searching for one person. For another, the same year means unpaid rent, lost security and a gap that will later have to be explained. Both have postponed a decision. Yet only one of them may be allowed to describe that time, in retrospect, as development.

The inequality does not lie only in the resources available. It also concerns the meaning an interruption may later be permitted to have. What is described in one person's life as maturation

or courageous reorientation may be read in another as a lack of discipline. Some people are allowed to experiment, turn back and begin again. Others are required to function reliably very early.

From the outside, this difference is easy to miss. What can be seen is that work is being done, tasks are being completed and decisions are being made. Less visible is the room a person had to move within, and what deviation would have cost.

A system may be productive because it creates possibilities. It may also appear productive because the price of not functioning has been made very high. As long as the expected results continue to appear, the two are difficult to distinguish.

Stability, too, may depend on displacement. A workflow remains flexible because employees reorganise their time at short notice. A service remains reliable because someone gives up rest. An institution absorbs a crisis because the people who sustain it use their own reserves.

From the outside, the system has responded. In the lives of those involved, the pressure may simply have been moved elsewhere.

For this reason, continuation cannot be judged only by the fact that something remains in place. We also have to ask what it consumes in order to continue, and whether the losses it creates remain open to correction.

This requires a more demanding idea of survival.

A person, an institution or a society would need to continue without using up the very capacities on which a different future might depend. It would need to make decisions under pressure without treating every decision as final, to recognise obligations while leaving their distribution open to question, and to endure differences without turning them into permanent ranks.

Such survival would not be recognised by the absence of loss.

No life can preserve all its possibilities. No institution can continue every activity. No society can prevent every harm or keep every path open at once. Decisions close possibilities, and time cannot be multiplied indefinitely.

The question is what remains possible afterward. Can a person still reconsider the standard by which a decision was made? Can an institution learn from a failure without merely adding another procedure? Can a society change the way it distributes a burden rather than repeatedly asking the same people to absorb it?

To remain alive, in this sense, is not a condition reached once and for all. It is a capacity that has not been destroyed.

Memory belongs to that capacity.

Without memory, every generation, every institution and every person would have to begin again with the same questions. Knowledge and procedures allow us to start with something others have already discovered. A language was spoken before we learned it. A right was fought for before we could invoke it. Even an unremarkable gesture may contain experience passed on over many years.

But an answer can outlive the question that produced it.

A procedure remains after the condition that once made it reasonable has disappeared. A form continues to ask for information that nobody uses. When someone asks why, no reason is given. They are told that the field has always been there.

The procedure has been preserved. The connection from which it arose has not.

This is how experience can become habit. Not because habit is inherently bad, but because its relationship to the reality it once answered has been broken.

Learning from experience therefore means more than taking over an earlier answer. It requires bringing that answer into contact with present conditions again. Some things prove themselves once more. Others lose their self-evidence. Occasionally, learning begins with the ability to let something go.

This is difficult because orders do not exist only in regulations and buildings. They are also held in expectations, careers and dependencies. Even a form that no longer carries us very far may still offer security because its boundaries are known.

Sometimes a path is continued not because it remains convincing, but because too much time has already been invested in it. Stopping then seems to devalue everything that came before. The past, which once gave a life direction, begins to make demands on its future.

Institutions may remain attached to a procedure for a similar reason: abandoning it would require earlier decisions to be reconsidered. A society may defend an order because too many other areas have already been adapted to it. The longer something has existed, the easier it becomes to treat its duration as proof of its necessity.

Yet duration tells us only that something has continued.

Some things remain in place because the costs of changing them fall on different people from the costs of preserving them. Those who benefit from continuity may not be the ones who absorb its consequences.

This is also where the comparison between a society and an organism reaches its limit. A body may use up reserves and accept damage in order to preserve the whole. Human losses cannot be calculated in the same way as functional sacrifices. A society does not possess a life separate from the lives of its members, whose preservation could justify any price.

The question of continuation therefore includes the question of how its costs are distributed.

Who decides what is indispensable? Who carries the burden? Is it temporary, or is it repeatedly assigned to the same people? Were other possibilities seriously considered, or is the existing form of the order itself the only thing exempt from examination?

An order may have to surrender parts of its shape so that it does not continue surrendering the people who cannot find a place within it.

Change, however, offers no simple answer. Institutions can reform continuously, introduce new terms and reorganise their processes without touching any of their underlying assumptions. A system may be restless and still incapable of learning.

The decisive distinction does not run simply between preservation and change.

Some things must remain because they support common possibilities. Others must change because preserving them increasingly restricts those possibilities. A language remains alive because it can receive new experiences. A relationship can continue because the people within

it are not required to remain forever unchanged. An institution may remain faithful to its purpose precisely by abandoning a procedure that once made that purpose possible and now obstructs it.

The fidelity is not to the form alone, but to what the form was meant to make possible.

For an individual, this question arises differently. A person does not decide the continuation of a whole society, yet a life cannot preserve every form it has once assumed. Decisions close paths. Obligations limit freedom. Some possibilities disappear because others were chosen.

Maturity can hardly mean keeping every imaginable life open. Perhaps it means learning to distinguish between a loss that belongs to one's own decision and a loss that continues to be carried only because an earlier measure still possesses authority.

A crisis does not grant this distinction. It contains no wisdom by itself. Some crises destroy more than can later be recovered. Some decisions remain wrong. Some possibilities do not return.

But a crisis can create distance. What long appeared to be the only possible form of life becomes visible, for a moment, as a form. A goal reveals itself as a goal rather than a law of nature. A certainty becomes something that arose under particular conditions and can therefore be questioned.

The movement beyond mere survival may begin there: in looking again at what was saved and asking whether it should be carried forward in the same form.

This also changes the question of personal significance.

A person does not have to be indispensable for their actions to make a difference. The world was prepared before them and will continue after them. They control neither the whole context in which they act nor all the consequences that follow.

They inherit rules, expectations and possibilities. Some they continue. Others they alter almost imperceptibly. Some they refuse. No single action explains the world. Yet through what people accept, alter or pass on, it does not remain entirely the same.

For me, this suggests a less heroic idea of agency.

Artistic attention may begin at a similar point, when a functioning form loses its self-evidence for a moment. It becomes possible to see that it arose under particular conditions, that it contains assumptions, and that it might have been otherwise.

Art does not have to resolve what appears in that distance. It may be enough not to close it too quickly.

Perhaps the same is true of a life. What carries us through one period does not necessarily have to become its permanent form. At some point, what has been preserved has to be looked at again.

