

The Distance We Need

On Belonging, Responsibility, and the Work of Connection

When my father died in March 2026 at the age of eighty-four, two different forms of closeness gathered around us.

My Spanish relatives and friends came. Some arrived in person; others called. People sat together, stayed, told stories and remembered details I had forgotten. There was grief, but grief did not occupy the whole room. Someone repeated an expression my father often used. Another recalled an incident that had once seemed ordinary and now appeared precious. People cried and, sometimes only a few minutes later, laughed.

The laughter did not diminish the loss. It allowed my father to remain present as more than the person who had died.

Many of our German friends and acquaintances responded differently. Their calls were careful, their messages thoughtful, their expressions of sympathy sincere. They seemed reluctant to intrude. Few asked directly whether they might come by that afternoon or the following day. Most appeared to wait for us to indicate what we wanted.

I understood their restraint. I had grown up in Germany and knew the respect contained in not entering another person's grief without invitation. I understood the uncertainty too. What could one say? Would a visit create another obligation? Would a cheerful memory seem inappropriate? Perhaps the bereaved wanted quiet. Perhaps asking too directly would make a private pain public before they were ready.

My wife, who is German, experienced the Spanish response differently. She was deeply moved by it. She did not perceive the calls, visits and gatherings as an intrusion. She experienced them as support.

This stayed with me because it made any simple cultural conclusion impossible. It would be easy to say that Spanish culture values closeness while German culture values distance. There may be some truth in that distinction, but not enough. My wife had been formed within the more restrained culture and nevertheless found the other response more sustaining. I could understand both forms and still feel more strongly carried by the one that did not wait for us to organise the connection ourselves.

Culture does not determine what a person needs. It gives certain distances familiar meanings.

In one social environment, arriving without a carefully negotiated invitation may mean: You belong to us, and you should not have to face this alone.

In another, waiting for an invitation may mean: Your grief is yours, and I will not make a claim on it.

How often do we mistake the distance familiar to us for the distance another person needs? The intention in both cases may be care. But the form of that care determines who must take the next step.

A sentence such as “Let me know if you need anything” can be entirely sincere. It respects the autonomy of the person who is grieving and avoids imposing a form of support they may not want. It also leaves them with a task. They must recognise what they need, decide who might provide it, make contact, find words for the request and perhaps reassure the other person that they are not being inconvenient.

The person whose life has just been interrupted must organise the conditions under which others may enter that interruption.

Restraint can protect someone from an unwanted demand. Yet it can also shift the work of connection onto the person with the least strength available for it. The wish not to intrude may contain respect, but it may also spare the person who stays away from the uncertainty of arriving at the wrong moment, saying the wrong thing or discovering that grief cannot be made more manageable through careful words.

The Spanish relatives and friends accepted a different risk. They might come too close. They offered their presence before knowing with certainty whether it was wanted. Yet the offer was concrete. We did not first have to prove that we needed them.

This does not produce a general rule. Some people require solitude after a loss. A room full of voices can become unbearable. A visit may demand attention that someone cannot give. Even a gentle question can arrive too early. Closeness can turn an experience into something public before the person living through it is ready.

But leaving every decision to the person who is hurt is not neutral either.

Perhaps care begins with an initiative that remains open to refusal. Not simply: Call me if you need something. Rather: I would like to come by this afternoon. You do not have to prepare anything. Say no if today is not right.

The distance remains negotiable. The connection does not have to be created from nothing. I have often felt that I live between these two understandings. Physically, I am usually more

comfortable with space. I do not need constant contact or the continuous presence of others. Closeness becomes tiring when it leaves too little room for inner movement. I value privacy, silence and the possibility of withdrawing without having to account for every withdrawal. At the same time, I long for a form of belonging that does not disappear when I take that space.

I do not want closeness to depend on permanent availability. But neither do I want distance to mean that the relationship has been suspended until I reactivate it. I need room, but not the withdrawal of connection.

Physical distance, emotional accessibility and the reliability of a relationship are not the same. Two people may sit close together and remain unreachable to one another. Another person may live hundreds of kilometres away and still be present within the structure of a life. Some families speak every day and allow little difference. Others speak less often but do not withdraw affection when someone changes direction.

The amount of space between people tells us little unless we know what the relationship can survive.

A secure connection does not eliminate distance. It changes what distance means. Silence does not immediately become rejection. Difference does not have to be resolved before belonging can continue. A person can step away without every step becoming a threat.

Where a relationship is less secure, the same movement may be experienced as the beginning of abandonment. A delayed answer becomes evidence. A request for space sounds like a concealed farewell. Closeness grows more urgent because it is not trusted.

The distance someone can bear therefore depends partly on what remains reliable across it. That reliability may be emotional, but it is never only emotional. Someone can move away from a family expectation more easily when housing, income, care and recognition do not depend entirely on remaining within it. A person can leave an intolerable job when one interruption will not destroy every future path. Someone can disagree with a community when belonging is not immediately withdrawn as punishment.

The freedom to take distance is unequally distributed. So is the ability to refuse closeness. A person with greater power can withdraw and allow others to absorb the consequences. A manager can become unavailable while employees remain expected to respond. A family member can treat every boundary as a rejection while assuming that their own needs require no explanation. An institution may demand intimate disclosure from those seeking help while

remaining largely opaque about its own decisions.

Belonging is not always the protection against distance. It can also become the means through which distance is forbidden. Families, communities and institutions may require closeness as proof of loyalty. The person who withdraws is called ungrateful. The one who does not share enough is accused of coldness. A different way of mourning becomes evidence that the bond was insufficient.

The belonging I seek is therefore not unconditional proximity. It is a connection capable of allowing difference, silence and physical space without turning them into betrayal.

Who is allowed to change the distance without risking their place in the relationship?

The question reaches beyond private relationships. It concerns the forms through which societies distribute dependence and autonomy. A boundary can be expressed more freely when crossing it does not threaten every source of support. Withdrawal can become a real choice only when it does not lead immediately to isolation, poverty or exclusion. Even the most personal distance rests on conditions that are not entirely personal.

Long before I encountered distance in this form of grief, it had already become central to my photographic work. The experience did not create the question, but returned it to me differently.

In art, the responsibility created by distance changes.

A viewer generally has more freedom to enter or leave an encounter with art. A work does not owe that viewer emotional care in the same sense. It may disturb, delay and refuse an immediate answer.

A work can tell the viewer whom to feel for, which injury matters and what moral position should follow. It can also withhold these instructions. Neither form is innocent, and neither is automatically more serious.

Empathy can open a genuine path into a work. A face, a biography or a recognisable form of suffering may allow someone to approach an experience that would otherwise remain remote. There is nothing inherently superficial about this movement. A person may first enter through recognition and only later encounter what exceeds it.

The difficulty begins when felt proximity appears to complete the encounter. The viewer recognises a wound, experiences compassion and is offered a position from which both the feeling and its moral meaning seem clear. What began as an opening can then become a conclusion.

An emotional reaction may be sincere and still leave the conditions behind an experience untouched. It may direct attention towards what can be personalised while allowing routines, infrastructures and distributed responsibilities to remain abstract. A person can be deeply moved by an individual story and return unchanged to the order that repeatedly produces similar stories.

Empathy becomes a shortcut not because it is false, but because arrival can begin to feel like completion.

Distance can interrupt that completion. It can require the viewer to remain with something that does not immediately offer identification. It can ask why a space has been organised in a particular way, who may pass through it, whose work keeps it functioning and which assumptions have already become material form.

A barrier, a waiting area or a loading bay does not present itself as a person whose pain can be recognised. Yet each can contain human decisions, exclusions, dependencies and expectations. The human is not absent simply because no face occupies the centre of the image.

In my work, the frame is chosen. One image remains while another is removed. Repetitions, interruptions and transitions are organised. The work is not neutral, nor is it an empty surface onto which every interpretation can be projected. It establishes relations and places limits around what can reasonably be seen within them.

But it should not determine the viewer's final position in advance.

The work should not tell the viewer where to stand. It should make them aware that they already stand somewhere.

This means that distance is not a withdrawal from the encounter. It is a way of refusing to complete the encounter on the viewer's behalf. The work offers a situation, but the viewer must decide what becomes visible within it, which assumptions have been brought to it and how their own position is implicated in what they see.

That demand carries its own risk. An artist can confuse absence with depth. A work can offer so little orientation that the viewer is left not with responsibility but with indifference.

Openness can become a flattering name for something that has never been made sufficiently precise.

Have I created a situation in which another person can genuinely see and judge, or have I merely withdrawn and named that withdrawal openness?

The question cannot be answered by intention alone. The fact that an artist wishes to respect the viewer's freedom does not mean that the work has created a meaningful space for it. A work must offer something against which the viewer's assumptions can meet resistance. It must establish relations clear enough to be encountered without closing them into a single conclusion.

Otherwise, the artist has not shared responsibility. They have displaced it.

Viewers also arrive with different needs, histories and learned ways of seeing. Someone who has been injured may seek recognition in a work. Another may need indirectness precisely because immediate emotional proximity would be overwhelming. One person experiences a distanced image as cold. Another finds in it the freedom to approach without being told which personal wound they are expected to reveal.

There is no single distance at which art becomes accessible.

A viewer familiar with conceptual or sequential photography may experience restraint as an invitation to remain. Someone else may experience the same restraint as exclusion. The difference does not prove that one viewer is more serious than the other. It reveals that aesthetic distance also has conditions: time, confidence, prior experience and the expectation that uncertainty will eventually yield something worth attending to.

An artist cannot eliminate these conditions. Nor should every work attempt to meet every viewer at the same point. But the distance a work creates should not be mistaken for an absence of responsibility. To leave the viewer free is not to leave them alone. It is to construct a relation in which judgement remains necessary and possible.

After my father's death, I did not need every person to know what I felt. I doubt that anyone could have known. What mattered was that some people were willing to be present without possessing that knowledge.

Their presence did not resolve grief. It gave grief a social form. It allowed my father to be remembered as a whole person, not only as the source of our loss.

The more restrained responses were not necessarily less sincere. But sincerity that remains entirely within one person may never become support for another. A connection must take some form if it is to be experienced across a distance.

Art requires another form. It should not arrive at the viewer's door and decide what the encounter must mean. But neither can it remain at a safe distance and call that freedom.

It has to create a relation strong enough to hold uncertainty.

Perhaps the distance we need is not a fixed amount of space. It is the space a connection can survive without turning closeness into possession or distance into abandonment.

In life, that may mean offering to come while allowing the other person to refuse.

In art, it may mean constructing an encounter precisely enough that the viewer cannot remain innocent within it, while leaving the final act of judgement in their hands.

The distances are not the same. Neither are the responsibilities.

What must remain is a connection within which a response is still possible.