Northern Wind

One Question, a Thousand Lives

What do you consider the most important discovery of your life?

We’re asking people of different ages, professions, and countries to tell us about a discovery that changed how they see themselves or the world. It may have come in a conversation, through years of work, or on an ordinary day you still remember.

The responses will form an international, multilingual literary anthology. This is a noncommercial project, and there is no fee to take part.

How to take part

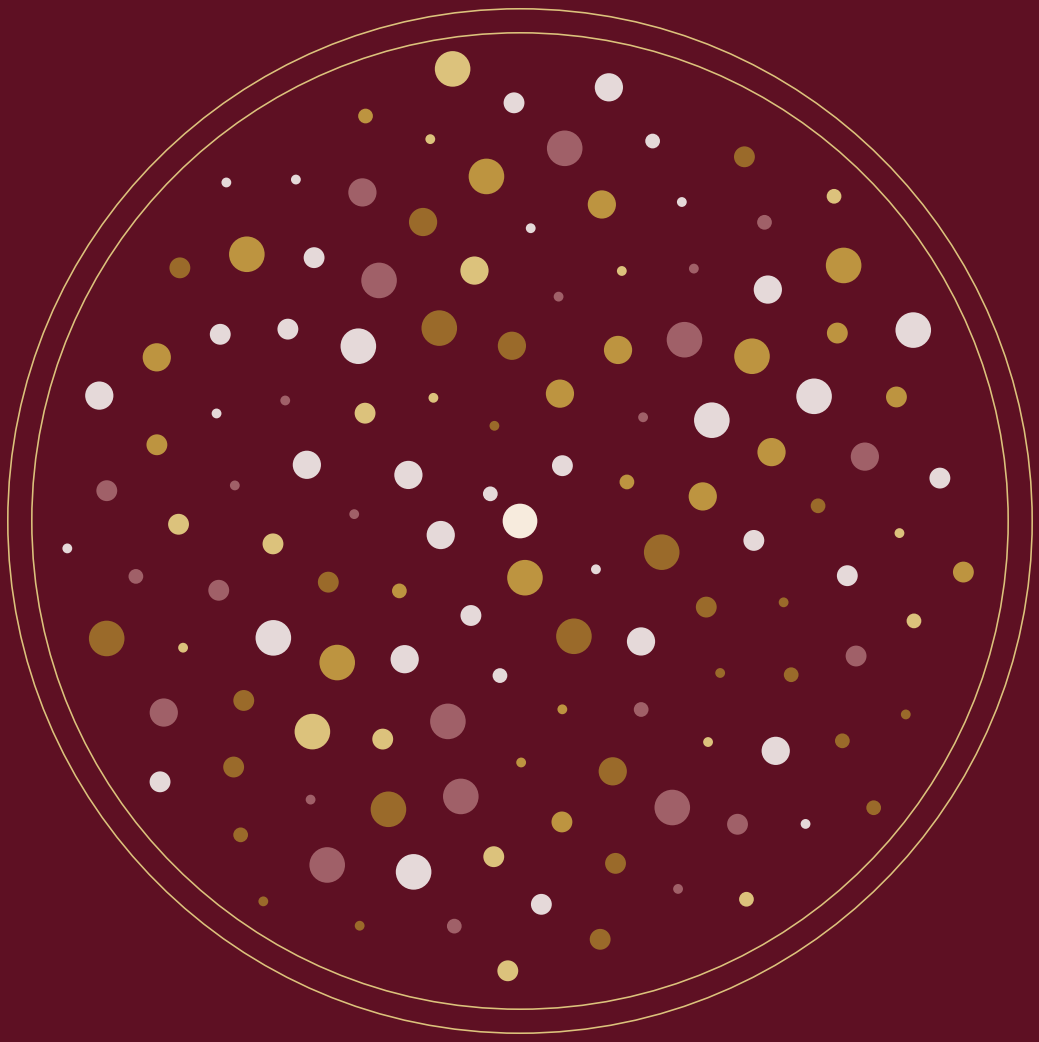
Send your response to severnyjveter56@gmail.com. A few lines or a longer reflection are welcome. If you remember how you came to your discovery, tell us that part of the story.

We’ll ask for your permission before publishing your response.

Israel Belkin, founder of Northern Wind

The anthology sample follows

GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN PROJECT



THE MOST IMPORTANT THING I HAVE LEARNED IN LIFE

Voices from Around the World

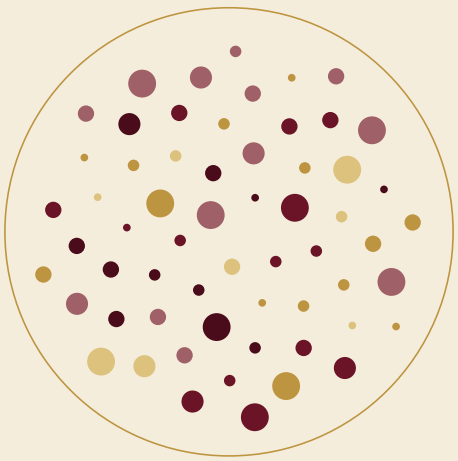
NORTHERN WIND

Every Life Holds a Discovery

No one passes through the world unchanged. Somewhere between a childhood kitchen and a late-evening reckoning, every person comes upon something that alters the way they see: a sentence that at last makes sense, a loss that teaches what no lecture could, a quiet kindness that rearranges what they thought mattered.

Such knowledge is rarely found in books. It is earned slowly, and at a cost, and it usually remains unspoken: carried from one day into the next and, in the end, out of the world altogether.

This anthology exists to keep it. We are gathering the most important personal discoveries of people of different generations, cultures and countries, in their own words, so that what a life has taught may outlast the life itself.



One Question. Countless Lives.

What do you consider the most important discovery of your life?

It is a question with no wrong answer. A child and a sage, a surgeon and a sailor, a believer and a doubter can each reply to it honestly, and no two replies will ever be alike. It asks for no credentials and no argument, only for what a life has taught.

That is why it can bring so many different people onto a single page: the question is small enough for anyone to answer, and large enough that no one can exhaust it.

Voices Across Borders

The anthology has already begun. Four voices have given their answers, and invitations are now going out to people from every part of the world and every walk of life. All will be heard as equals.

I	Spiritual leaders	II	Writers and poets
III	Philosophers	IV	Psychologists
V	Scientists and scholars	VI	Artists and cultural figures
VII	Every generation, young and old	VIII	People whose names the world has never heard

THE FIRST VOICES

Ellen J. Langer · Dan Ariely · James Hollis
Roman Grinfeld

Fame does not make a human experience more valuable. Every sincere answer has a dignity of its own.



Ellen J. Langer

UNITED STATES · PSYCHOLOGIST

Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, known for her research on mindfulness. Her work asks how much of what we take to be fixed is only habit.

THE ANSWER

Do Not Believe Everything You Know

Do Not Believe Everything You Know

I don’t know if I have a definitive answer to it but here is one that comes to mind often.

Nearly everything I thought was constant was not constant. My body, my capabilities, what I knew to be “true”, what was old or young or impossible. I could go on and on. They were all products of our culture that we stopped questioning once we were indoctrinated into them.

This has come to me over time. I have tried many things. At one point I realized that humans would continue to do something once they no longer applied and we were unaware of this. I did this as well. We weren’t dumb we just decided at some point that it was true and never questioned it again. I began to call this mindlessness. When you notice new things you are being mindful. So simple.

Once you realize this many things that seemed fixed become mutable. Medical diagnoses, for example become questionable instead of a life sentence. Constraints become questions. An incident does not have a meaning until we decide it does.

There are times I am still mindless and will be for the rest of my life. But realizing that the world isn’t static and neither am I has had an important impact on my life—more than any other discovery I’ve made. Don’t believe everything you know.

Mindfully yours, Ellen Langer

The author’s original English text. Opening courtesies omitted; printed with the author’s permission.



Dan Ariely

ISRAEL · UNITED STATES · BEHAVIORAL ECONOMIST

Psychologist and behavioral economist, and the author of Predictably Irrational. He studies why people choose as they do, and why they so often do not choose as they expect.

THE ANSWER

My Half a Beard

My Half a Beard

As you may know, years ago I was badly burned, and most of my body is covered with scars, including the right side of my face. So, hair simply doesn't grow on the right side of my face. For most of my life the solution was obvious: I shaved. […]

Then, a few years ago, I went on a month-long hike, and as a consequence I didn't shave for a month. When I got home and looked in the mirror, I saw something strange. A full beard on the left side of my face, and nothing on the right. Half a beard. I didn't like it. It looked strange. […]

People started writing to thank me for my half a beard. Why? These were people who were struggling with their own injuries, people who felt that they spent every day trying to hide something. For example, one woman in her early sixties wrote that she had been injured in a car accident when she was seventeen, and that she had not worn a skirt since. Now, she said, she was going to try. […]

The injury became part of my story rather than the thing my story was working against. […]

When I stopped shaving, I stopped buying into the social code of symmetry. And it turned out that stopping was not just a grooming decision. It was an act of acceptance, and its effects spread in me well beyond my face. […]

So let me leave you with a question, or more correctly a task: what are some of your half-beards? What is something you do, or carefully avoid doing, because of a short-term cost you can picture all too well, while the long-term consequences might be entirely different from anything you can currently imagine?

Irrationally yours, Dan

Abridged by the editors from the author's English text. Omissions are marked […].



James Hollis

UNITED STATES · JUNGIAN ANALYST

Jungian analyst, author and therapist, living in Washington, D.C. He trained at the C. G. Jung Institute in Zürich.

THE ANSWER

What I Have Learned

What I Have Learned

Perhaps the most important thing I have learned occurred to me over a gap of several decades, on different continents, at different stages of life, but they are linked together in a compelling way. […]

As a callow sophomore in college, I eagerly took my first class in philosophy assuming that I would get my questions answered for who, after all, were more qualified to purvey these large insights than the great philosophers. But, to my dismay, as we worked through various historic thinkers, I grew more and more puzzled. Rather than answering my questions, they merely raised more questions for me. […]

First, I grudgingly had to replace my youthful expectation of certainty with the capacity to ask large questions and learn to live with the ambiguity they inevitably generated. Secondly, I realized that I should not be so attached to the received models the world offered, but to discard them when better instruments, and better questions, demanded. […]

I had to face the fact, the Zen-like paradox, that what we become, even the “successful” parts, are now the chief obstacles to serving what the psyche wishes to express through us. […]

Rather than serve the ego’s anxious agenda for understanding and possible control, the more authentic requirement is to periodically let go of what we understand, the models that had more or less made sense of things, and embrace the mystery in which we all swim. […]

I can now accept a life without that certainty the youth once coveted, embrace the mystery of it all, and further accept that whatever I conclude today will likely have to be relinquished when better instruments, better questions arise. So, I have lived without that certainty, but it is much more interesting this way.

Abridged by the editors from the author’s English text. Omissions are marked […].



Roman Grinfeld

ISRAEL · FAMILY PHYSICIAN

A family physician from Kiryat Shmona, aged 77. For most of his life he has helped people keep their health. He does not name one great discovery: for him, the main event is life itself.

THE ANSWER

Life Itself

Life Itself

You know, I have never thought about which discovery was the most important in my life. Probably because I simply never had such a discovery.

I have lived 77 years. That is not a small number. So much has happened over these years that it is impossible either to list it or even to remember it. There were important events, there were happy days, there were hard times. Some things worked out, some did not. Sometimes it seemed that life was changing forever, and then time passed — and it turned out that it was simply going on.

And now you ask which discovery was the most important.

I do not know.

Perhaps because I do not see life as a competition in which one must necessarily arrive at some result. Or as a journey at the end of which a person must without fail find the answer to the main question.

We live. That is, really, all there is to it.

And, in my view, that is already a great deal.

I am a doctor. For most of my life I have been helping people keep their health. All sorts of people come to me. Young and old, confident and bewildered, calm and frightened. Each has their own worries, their own hopes, their own ideas about what matters in life.

When a person is healthy, they rarely think what a blessing it is simply to wake up in the morning, get out of bed, leave the house, and go about everyday business. All of this seems natural.

And then something happens. Illness, pain, sudden weakness. And what yesterday had no value at all suddenly becomes the most precious thing.

The ability to breathe calmly. To walk a few steps. To sleep well. To have dinner with loved ones. To feel no pain.

A doctor sees this constantly.

And, probably, that is why it is hard for me to agree that in life there must necessarily be some one great discovery.

I have seen people who achieved a great deal but were not happy. And I have seen others to whom, it would seem, nothing special happened, yet who knew how to rejoice in the simplest things.

Of course, I cannot claim that some people lived their lives rightly and others wrongly. And who, in fact, has the right to decide that?

With age you begin to treat such judgments more carefully.

In youth, much seems final. You think you have already understood people, figured yourself out, know what is good and what is bad. Then life gradually shows how much more complicated everything is.

The person you considered weak unexpectedly shows remarkable courage. The one you were used to thinking of as strong turns out to be utterly helpless in the face of an ordinary everyday misfortune.

Sometimes people surprise you with their kindness. Sometimes with cruelty. And most often both somehow, inexplicably, live together in one person.

And the more you observe, the less you want to draw final conclusions.

I do not know whether I have become wiser over these years. Perhaps I have simply grown used to the fact that not every question has an answer.

The medical profession in general teaches a certain modesty.

You may know a great deal, be able to do a great deal, have vast experience. But there will always be a situation in which this proves insufficient.

Sometimes you do everything right, and the result is not what you would have wished. Sometimes a person recovers faster than you expected. Sometimes an ordinary conversation brings them no less relief than the prescribed treatment.

And gradually you begin to understand that before you is not simply a patient with a particular illness, but a person with a life of their own.

They have a family, memories, fears, habits. There are things they tell no one. There is a past you will never know.

You see only a small part of their fate.

Probably this applies to all our relationships with people. We meet, talk, sometimes spend many years together, yet still know far from everything about one another.

And yet every person lives an entire life. A single, unrepeatable one.

When I was twenty, seventy-seven seemed something unimaginably distant. People of that age seemed almost like old men from another world.

Now I am seventy-seven myself.

And I cannot say that inside I feel like a completely different person. Of course, age makes itself felt. There are things that used to come easily and now require effort. One has to reckon with limitations that I never noticed before.

But interest in life does not go away.

I still want to learn something new. To talk with people. To read, think, argue. Sometimes just to sit in silence.

One’s attitude to time changes.

In youth it seems that there is endless time ahead. You can put something off, not go somewhere, not meet someone. You will manage it later.

And then you discover that some meetings are no longer possible. Certain conversations never took place. Some words remained unspoken.

And still I would not want to turn this into a sad tale about old age.

Because life does not consist only of losses.

It goes on as long as we live.

In it there are still unexpected meetings, small joys, discoveries that we do not even call discoveries.

Sometimes a good day is simply a good day. There is no need to look for some special meaning in it.

It seems to me that we far too often try to sum up our own lives. As if life were an accounting ledger in which one must tally achievements, mistakes, gains and losses.

But can life be tallied like that?

How does one assess an ordinary conversation with someone close? Or a day when nothing special happened, but you felt good? Or years that seem alike, one after another, and then it turns out that they were precisely what made up the most important part?

Strange things stay in the memory.

Sometimes you forget an event that you once considered tremendously significant, yet remember perfectly some entirely ordinary evening. A light in a window. Someone’s voice. Words spoken many years ago.

Why did precisely this survive?

I do not know.

And I do not think I necessarily have to know.

You ask me about the most important discovery of my life.

I could, probably, come up with a beautiful answer. Say that the main thing is love, family, health, work, kindness, or the ability to understand people.

All of this really is important.

But why should I choose just one thing?

Can one separate love from life? Work from life? Joy from sorrow? Successes from mistakes?

After all, all of this is life.

And I would not want to declare one part of it the main one and the rest secondary.

I do not know how much longer I am to live. No one knows that, not even a doctor.

But as long as life goes on, it remains interesting to me.

Not every day is a good one. Not everything works out. One does not always have enough strength and patience. There are anxieties, disappointments, fatigue.

And still, in the morning a new day comes.

You wake up and understand that you can live it.

Meet someone. Hear something unexpected. Do something useful. See a familiar place that for some reason looks different today.

Perhaps nothing remarkable will happen.

But it will be one more day of your life.

And is that so little?

That is why I cannot name any one discovery as the greatest.

I did not have one.

And I do not feel that I have lost anything because of that.

If you ask me what was the main event of my life, I will answer: life itself.

Not a single day, not an achievement, not a meeting, not a discovery.

All of it together.

All seventy-seven years.

And everything that still lies ahead.

A literary edition based on an oral response, awaiting the participant’s approval. English translation prepared by the editors from the Russian literary edition; not yet reviewed by the participant.

Your Words. Your Voice.

I

Participation is entirely voluntary.

You are invited, never obliged. Whether to take part, and when, is for you alone to decide.

II

Your answer may be of any length.

Write a single sentence or many pages. There is no minimum, no maximum, and no form your answer must take.

III

Nothing is published without your consent.

Your words will appear in the book only with your permission, and only after you have seen and approved the final text.

A book of honest voices can only be built on trust.

A Book Beyond Borders

We hope to publish the anthology in seven languages, so that each voice may be read by people far from where it was spoken, in the language they know best.



These are planned editions. No publishing agreements have yet been concluded.

We Would Be Honored to Hear Your Answer

Dear friend,

If this question has stayed with you, we would be glad to know your answer. It may be a single sentence or many pages, written in your own words and in your own time.

Whatever you choose to share will be read with care and treated with respect. We would be honored to give your voice a place among the others, and to carry what your life has taught you to readers across the world.

Four voices have already answered. We would be honored if yours were to join them.

Israel Belkin

Founder and Publisher

ISRAEL BELKIN · SAFED, ISRAEL

severnyjveter56@gmail.com