

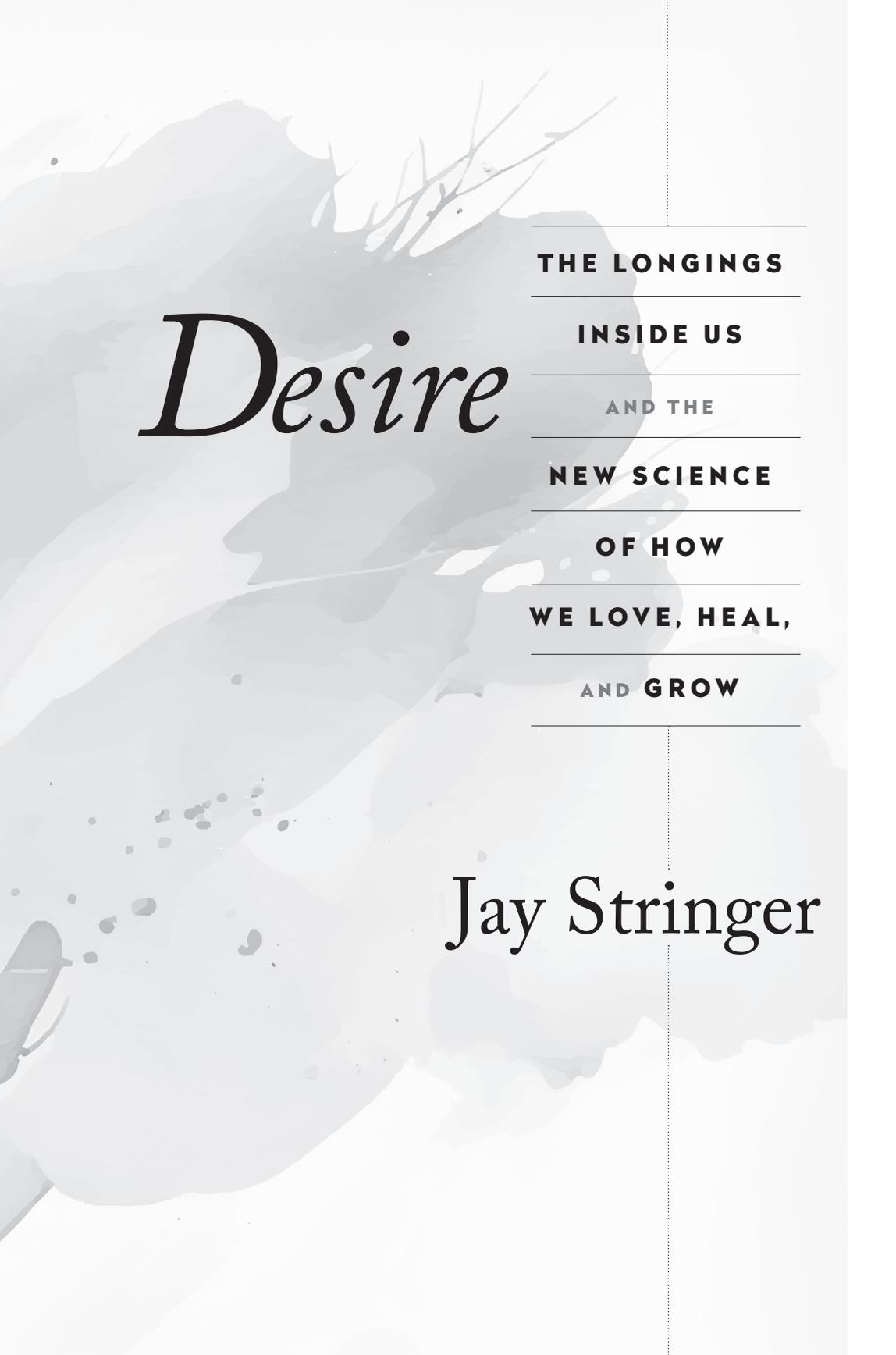
JAY STRINGER

Bestselling author of UNWANTED



The Longings
Inside Us and the
New Science of How We
Love, Heal, and Grow

Desire



Desire

THE LONGINGS

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WE LOVE, HEAL,

AND GROW

Jay Stringer

C O N V E R G E N T

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To the readers who will look up at the stars
and plumb the depths,
that their hearts may become fully alive

And to Amos and Iona—whose desires provoke me,
again and again, to be young again.

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Author's Note

THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK, I'LL SHARE STORIES OF PEOPLE I'VE met as a psychotherapist and researcher. To protect their identities, each character is a composite drawn from multiple individuals, carefully chosen to highlight key inflection points in their journeys related to desire. As you read their stories, I encourage you to look for moments when you may have felt something similar. Let their narratives inspire you to excavate your own.

Introduction

The Civil War of Desire

YOU ARE ENGAGED IN A CIVIL WAR WITH DESIRE. DESIRE IS THE birthplace of your greatest joys, but it's also responsible for your deepest heartaches. It fuels your search for romance, personal growth, and meaningful work. It drives you to seek what truly makes you happy, to cultivate greater intimacy and purpose, even as it exposes you to some of life's harshest experiences.

For all of us, the desire for love can open the door to betrayal. Desire for success can reveal our darkest greed and envy, and reckless desires can inflict immense pain on ourselves and those we love. Desire has the power to turn us into the best or worst version of ourselves.

In response, most of us adopt strategies—whether we're aware of them or not—in hopes of finding relief. Some of us suppress what we really want as a way of avoiding the disappointment of unfulfilled desires, or even the disillusionment that follows their fulfillment. Others of us sabotage our desires, turning them into burdensome demands on others for validation or approval, or making choices that undermine our well-being and keep us from facing the real work of growth. Regardless of how we navigate these complexities, one thing remains clear: Most of us could use some help in our relationship to desire.

Desire problems can't be blamed on personal shortcomings alone. We're living through an unprecedented moment in history. In the past, there was greater clarity surrounding gender roles and societal expectations—who would earn the income, who would care for the baby, and what (and who) defined the “the good life.” Now, we have access to choices that previous generations would have never conceived of, brought on by an increasingly digitized world, rapid geopolitical and social upheavals, a wealth of new knowledge about health and well-being, and evolving moral frameworks. Our struggle is no longer the tyranny of having too few choices, but the overwhelm of too many.

To further complicate matters, we're flooded with competing messages about how to handle desire. Many of us grew up in families or religious communities where desire was synonymous with something bad, selfish, or—God forbid—sexual. Then, as adults, we encountered a chorus of experts and social media influencers urging us to pursue our “one wild and precious life” while offering little practical guidance on how to do so. We're left wondering:

Why do I feel like something is “off” inside me, even though I think I had a decent childhood?

How can I feel so lonely and still want so much more from people at the same time?

Why does sex either feel underwhelming . . . or make me feel out of control?

Why is getting healthy—or staying motivated—so much harder than it should be?

This leaves us grappling with bigger questions about sex and relationships, the tension between personal fulfillment and family expectations, how success should be defined, and how we can cultivate authentic connections amid the noise. Bereft of wise guides, we scrape together input from friends, magazines, social media, and other less-than-ideal sources. Consequently, our relationship status with desire is . . . complicated.

Your Brain on Desire

The number of times a day our brain wants something is staggering. On average, adults make around thirty-five thousand (mostly subconscious) decisions daily, including what we will eat, what we will wear, who we will talk to, what we will say, and how we'll express ourselves.¹ We see a donut and we want food. We witness someone making a difference in the world and start questioning our own worth. We long for the latest Apple product. We see children playing and remember painful moments from our childhood, wondering why we didn't have similar experiences. We see a couple who genuinely seems to be in love, and suddenly our romantic relationship or singleness feels agonizing. Throughout the day, we are constantly collecting, interpreting, and acting on complex signals.

But what if the apparatus that helps us feel, interpret, and choose our desires is faulty, or at least misunderstood? As a licensed therapist and mental health researcher on the topic of desire, I've learned that most people are unaware of the formative stories, dynamics, and underlying motivations that shape these everyday longings. If the machinery directing so much of our decision-making is underdeveloped—if it's driving us toward pain instead of flourishing—shouldn't that haunt us? What's more, shouldn't we desire to repair it? Rather than suppressing or indulging desires, maybe it's time to develop curiosity about them.

Through my research and clinical work, I've had a front row seat to the civil wars of desire in over seven thousand men and women. I've counseled people who were navigating childhood trauma, extramarital affairs, sexual-desire discrepancies (in which one partner wants sex more or less than the other), the harmful effects of shameful religious systems like purity culture, depression, and professional confusion and burnout. I've concluded that it's not a question of *if* we will experience a major desire-related problem, but *when*.

There's More to Desire Than Sex

When we hear “desire,” our minds often jump straight to sex. But in doing so, we miss the bigger picture. Sex is one of desire's most power-

ful expressions, but desire is boundless, infusing every aspect of our lives. It is the energizing force that awakens our curiosity, the fire that fuels our ambition, the longing that propels us toward something more.

Even when we do talk specifically about sexual desire, the conversation remains far too narrow. We're seduced into thinking that a missing piece of sex education, a new tip to spice things up, or the latest clickbait article promising "mind-blowing" sex will finally unlock our erotic potential. But these quick fixes distract us from what truly matters—the personal and relational development that leads to true intimacy. Ironically, this lack of growth is precisely what keeps us from the passion and meaning we crave in sex. To unlock the full potential of desire (including better sex), we need to embrace it as a holistic force that extends far beyond the bedroom.

Desire Problems Are Not Random

As a therapist, my role is to create a safe yet challenging context where clients can explore the full spectrum of their relationship with desire—whether it's their deepest, wildest longings or past experiences that they've been too ashamed to acknowledge. I'm writing this book to offer you a similar experience.

At some point in our lives, we will face a significant challenge in our relationship to desire. We might long to fix something broken or missing inside of us, but have no idea how to do it. We might hope for something more in a relationship or career but feel powerless to make it happen. Desire problems could also manifest as anxiety or depression, when we begin to question whether our life holds any real meaning. In these moments, it's important to recognize that our desire problems are normal, but they are never random. The recurring conflicts we face have an uncanny way of revealing truths about ourselves and our stories that we've been unable or unwilling to confront.

When I researched my first book, *Unwanted*, I sought to delve into the meaning of common unwanted sexual behaviors like infidelity and out-of-control porn use. I received thousands of emails from people

who were beginning to get curious about their story and sexual behaviors for the first time. They told me that they never received any education on sexual health, and many shared tragic stories of sexual abuse. Others wondered aloud why certain porn searches were so alluring to them. It got to the point where some of my friends began calling me “the fantasy whisperer” because so many people were asking me to interpret their sexual desires. It was a beautiful season of life, because I saw how eager people were to resist the two great paradigms of our time: *pathologizing* desires or *dismissing* them as inconsequential. Curiosity about our desires creates a middle path, and it’s a path we need more now than ever.

Unwanted was able to answer some sexual-desire questions, but many it could not. As I continued my clinical work and paid closer attention to the problems facing my clients and society at large, I realized that the topic of desire was so much larger and more beautiful than I had previously understood. My clients and readers needed more than just guidance on outgrowing an unhealthy behavior. They needed a road map for how to be human—a means to better understand the human search for connection, purpose, and love. It’s a big aspiration, but so are the desires within us.

The word “desire” itself hints at this meaning. It originates from the Latin word *desidus*, meaning “the lack of the star.” It evokes a sense of being lost, a lack of orientation, and yet a longing to find a way home. It’s likely you’re reading this book because you’ve lost a star. You found a romantic partner and they turned out to be a piece of work. The career you once desired now leads to burnout. The family you love looks far more troubled than you ever imagined. The personal goals you invested significant resources and hope in have come back void.

Research shows that our desires are constantly changing. During adolescence, we desire independence from our parents and family culture.² In our twenties and thirties, we tend to be more motivated by professional goals, money, and the approval of others, whereas in the second half of life, we might find ourselves wanting more time with friends or grandchildren, good palliative care for terminal illness, and to pass along an enduring legacy.³

We are most likely to lose our North Star when our lives feel up-ended. But it happens, too, even when we're experiencing beauty and growth. A fabulous meal, a friend who genuinely cares, or a moment of personal success can leave us wondering why we've settled for so little throughout our life. Misery and beauty both alter our inner world—and in the process push us to abandon old desires in search of new ones.

In this way, desire is always a conversation between significant loss and great expectation. The search can be both heart-wrenching and exhilarating. Either way, your life is about to get interesting.

*Our Desires Are Shaped by Forces
We May Not Even Be Aware Of*

Consider a couple that wishes their home had a lush, green lawn. At first glance, their desire seems innocuous. But in the U.S. we owe our fixation on tidy, manicured yards to wealthy French and English aristocrats in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴ At the time, maintaining a lawn required a tremendous amount of labor and resources, making it a status symbol for the affluent. If our preferences for something as seemingly benign as lawns can be shaped by historical context, how much truer is this for our more consequential desires, such as our vocations, romantic partners, and vision of the “good life”?

Our desires are often shaped by what others want us to want—whether it's a beauty product, a tech gadget, a wellness trend, or a food craving. We rarely consider the multibillion-dollar industries behind them, all designed to stir our desires and open our wallets. Sexual desires are no exception. Pornography, in particular, has played a significant role in reshaping sexual norms. One striking example is the rise of sexual choking over the last fifteen years. A 2011 study found that 13 percent of women reported being choked by a partner.⁵ In 2019, another study found 38 percent of women had experienced unwanted acts like slapping, choking, gagging, or spitting during otherwise consensual sex.⁶ By 2024, a survey found that 61 percent of women had

been choked during sex.⁷ This rapid shift raises important questions about consent, safety, and who—and what—is shaping our desires.

The stakes are high: If we don't interrogate the origins of our desires, we surrender their authorship to others—whether to trauma, corporations, or cultural scripts. We might believe we're choosing freely, but our desires are consistently shaped by unseen forces. The question isn't just "What do I want?" but "Why do I want it?" Until we ask, we'll keep prioritizing the desires we've been sold over the ones that might set us free.

Desire Is a Mirror

In *Harry Potter*, the Mirror of Erised ("desire" spelled backwards) reflects a person's most ardent longings, often rooted in their deepest wound. When Harry looks into the mirror, he sees the image of his parents, who died after he was born. In the same way, our desires—healthy and not—hold a mirror up to our personal stories, reflecting our wounds, unfulfilled longings, and deepest passions.

I once worked with a client who wanted to sculpt his body into an Adonis-like beauty and be the most fashionable man in any room he entered. The taproot of this desire lay in grade school, where his classmates mocked him for his chubby belly and discount shoes. Childhood humiliation set up his quest for mastery in adulthood. As he began recognizing that his desires were messengers pointing to unaddressed trauma, he shifted his focus from conquering those stories of childhood embarrassment to healing them. His need for physical perfection transformed into a longing for deeper connection with his friends.

What did you desire as a kid? Maybe it was to be like Mike (remember the Michael Jordan commercials?), to play the electric guitar, to grow up on the prairie in another lifetime, or to travel to the moon. How did your family engage these desires? Did they cultivate them, ignore them, delight in them, or prioritize someone else's desires over yours?

As we age, our raw childhood desires tend to wane. We learn that becoming Michael Jordan, Bono, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Sally Ride, or Lance Armstrong probably isn't in the cards, and we set out to find a workable ratio between stability and passion. We know we must pay the bills, but we also want to preserve the divine spark of spontaneity within. Many of us get in the habit of choosing stability over honoring our desire for passion. Each time we do this, we set up problems that our future self will have to deal with.

We'll explore this in greater detail in Part One, but if you feel some combination of numb, stuck, lonely, depressed, or unfulfilled, know that these symptoms are calling you back to a robust relationship to desire. Within your childhood longings are clues to what your soul most deeply wants. It's your adult duty to study them and ask how they might be beckoning you to make a necessary change.

Who Is This Book For?

This book is written for humans. You might identify as straight or gay or bi or male or female or non-binary. You might be married (happily or miserably), in a lifelong partnership, single (happily or unhappily), widowed, or altogether disillusioned with the categories of singleness, dating, open relationships, or marriage. Although we all come to this conversation from different vantage points and will arrive at different conclusions, I hope the journey ahead will be similar for each of us: a commitment to engaging the stories, problems, and beauty of our lives with hospitality, integrity, and delight. Our life is speaking to us through our desires, but I wonder how well we are listening.

So, how is your relationship to desire? How do you feel like it's going? Maybe your desires feel out of control, because you can't seem to turn them off. Or maybe it's the opposite: You're wondering if anyone has invented a defibrillator for passion, because feeling emotionally flat or uninspired has become normal for you. There's a good chance you're somewhere in the middle: You have a deep appreciation for desire but find yourself occasionally surprised at how desperate or

entitled you can become with someone you love. Maybe you didn't even know you had a relationship with desire in the first place.

Regardless of where you find yourself on that continuum, desire is central to all that is beautiful and heartbreaking in your life—and therefore worthy of your full engagement. If you want to transform your relationship to desire, learn what informs it.

Ultimately, that's what we're after: a holistic approach to desire. In Chapter One, I'll introduce you to five core longings uncovered through my research with thousands of couples and fifteen years of clinical practice. Together, they'll help you make sense of your challenges, move through them with kindness, and achieve breakthroughs that felt out of reach until now. These five desires aren't just ideas; they are the foundation of human flourishing and a map to reclaiming your life. I hope that they lead you to love your story and gain deeper clarity about the meaning and hope embedded within your longings. May this journey into the heart of desire help you find the love and wonder you've been longing for.

A Resource to Go Deeper

If you're looking for an additional resource to help with this journey, I've created a hands-on companion to this book, the *Desire Workbook*. It's designed to help you dive deeper into the book's insights and apply them directly to your life. Through guided reflection, journaling prompts, and thought-provoking exercises, the workbook allows you to explore your five core longings on a personal level. The workbook is more than just a set of exercises—it's a tool for transformation, helping you unpack your story, break through barriers, and realign your desires with your true self. My recommendation would be to not just read this book, but use the workbook to excavate your story and actively author its future.

The Five Core Desires

AS A RESEARCHER AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST, I AM ENDLESSLY curious about desire. While we naturally dread facing issues connected to our love lives, self-worth, or careers, these struggles have so much to reveal to us. The dilemma is that we tend to pathologize our difficulties, thinking, *I'm so messed up. What's wrong with me?* Other times, we downplay their significance with a dismissive "It's not that big of a deal." Both responses hinder our growth. What we need is a third way, one that encourages us to engage our problems with uncommon kindness and curiosity.

This search for deeper understanding inspired me to create the Holistic Desire Survey, working with researchers to gather insights from over four thousand men and women worldwide. Participants answered deeply vulnerable questions about their childhood, trauma, romantic relationships (if partnered), mental health, sexual desires, and their lives' deepest longings.

The Holistic Desire Survey revealed that our desires and the problems we encounter related to them are far from random. While some individuals and couples are flourishing and enjoying deep satisfaction in their desires and relationships, others are struggling immensely, stuck in unwanted patterns. We have much to learn from both groups. Their courageous responses illuminate the precise reasons many of us

remain stuck in negative cycles. They also reveal that while common solutions—like improving communication, medication, or prioritizing sex—can be helpful, they often oversimplify and overlook the far more complex patterns at play. We might believe we’ve identified the root cause, only to discover later that, like water damage, the issue has spread into areas of our lives we hadn’t considered. Armed with insights from the survey, however, we’ll learn to address problems holistically—viewing them as interconnected systems rather than isolated issues. This approach will help us stop wasting our lives fighting ourselves and our partners, and instead, start focusing on what really matters to each of us.

One of my greatest takeaways from the research is the value of embracing a “learn-it-all” mindset. The moment we feel certain we know what is going on inside of us or in a relationship, we risk closing ourselves off to new insights. Our goal, then, is not to draw hard-and-fast conclusions, or succumb to self-loathing or resignation, but to approach life’s challenges with patience and curiosity.

The Danger of Partial Truths

As I reflected on the Holistic Desire Survey, I began noticing a pattern I had not appreciated in my clinical work. Many individuals and couples turn to me as a last resort, often after trying various therapeutic approaches. Many of them have tried some combination of talk therapy, somatic therapy, couples counseling (if in a relationship), EMDR, Internal Family Systems, or life coaching. Some had ventured into plant-based medicine, while others had sought wisdom from popular books like *The Body Keeps the Score* (to explore trauma) or *Come As You Are* (to learn more about human sexuality). Despite all their efforts, they hadn’t achieved the outcomes they desired.

I realized that this wasn’t because their previous therapies or the books they’d read weren’t valuable—though it’s true that not all therapists are created equally. Instead, the issue stemmed from a failure to integrate these diverse perspectives into a cohesive, holistic understanding.

Whether it's trauma, relationships, or personal growth, our focus on a single paradigm can lead us to overlook or even devalue other important perspectives. American psychologist Abraham Maslow famously remarked, "If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail."¹ Many clients experience something similar with their preferred tool. It initially works well . . . until it doesn't. When the paradigm fails to deliver results, they prematurely conclude that something is broken in them, in the relationship, or in the therapy field. Few realize the real issue lies in a lack of integration.

As we discussed in the Introduction, desire is at the center of all that is good, true, and beautiful in our world. Yet for too long, we've been walking through life's complex terrain without a map. If we do not develop a holistic relationship to desire, we risk spending our entire lives as underdeveloped humans, missing meaning, and living with half-hearted passions.

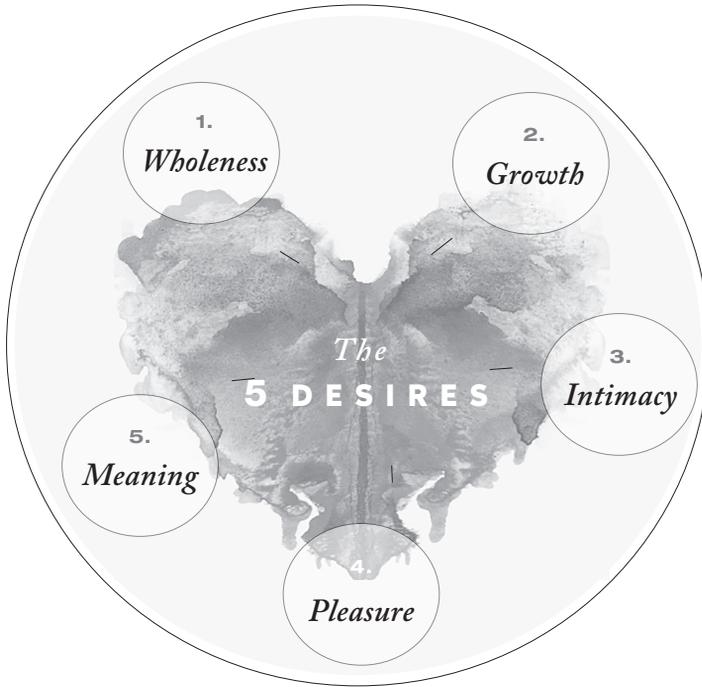
Our Five Core Longings: Developing Holistic Desire

Through my research and clinical practice, I've identified five essential desires that predict the quality of our individual and relational well-being. I'll introduce you to these now, and I'll spend the rest of the book demonstrating how they can help you understand the roots of your challenges and what it might take for you to build a better life. By cultivating each desire, you can unlock the breakthroughs you've been longing for in your personal journey and relationships.

The five core longings are:

- A desire for wholeness: our longing to heal the wounds of childhood and make sense of our past
- A desire for growth: our longing to live with authenticity and strength through life's deepest challenges
- A desire for intimacy: our longing to know and be known
- A desire for pleasure: our longing for touch, vitality, and sexual connection

A desire for meaning: our longing for clarity, purpose, and a life that matters



The book is divided into five parts, each dedicated to one of the core desires. While we'll explore each desire independently, it's important to recognize that they are more interconnected than we might realize. For example, as we begin to heal our childhood stories, it can shift the way we approach desires for growth, intimacy, and purpose. Or, when our marriage reveals that we are emotionally and sexually underdeveloped, it may prompt us to examine our early family dynamics and the lack of education around healthy sexuality. Each desire is deeply intertwined with the others.

Our goal throughout this book is to cultivate curiosity for how these desires are at work in our day-to-day lives. For example, my client's desire to sculpt his body into perfection had far more to do with escaping his story than embracing it with kindness. What we're all longing for is an integrated life. Developing a holistic relationship to desire is the key to creating it.

As you progress, you may find that one or two of the desires come naturally to you, while others are quite underdeveloped. This is a normal part of the journey. The chapters will empower you to build on your strengths and gently lean into the areas that require growth. While there's plenty to learn about the science of desire and the practical tools for its cultivation, this journey is less about acquiring information and more about cultivating curiosity about your own story and pondering where you might want it to go.

Now let's explore each desire in a bit more detail before we dive into them specifically in the next five parts of the book.

**ONE. A DESIRE FOR WHOLENESS:
EXCAVATING YOUR CHILDHOOD STORY**

As we explored earlier, your childhood is the foundation of your relationship to desire. We often believe we're in the driver's seat of our adult decisions, but have you ever wondered why you steer toward some desires and away from others? Part One will guide you to excavate the formative experiences of your childhood, revealing the stories that have shaped you into the person you are today, and providing clues into the origins of your deepest longings.

The two key questions for seeking wholeness are:

EXCAVATE YOUR STORY: How has my family shaped my relationship to desire?

TRAUMA AND DESIRE: How does childhood trauma shape my desires?

**TWO. A DESIRE FOR GROWTH:
THE CRUCIBLE OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT**

Desire problems serve as a *crucible* for personal growth, yet many of us have not been taught how to value the badlands of our soul. Instead of stepping into this crucible, we avoid it by filling our days with distractions and pursuits that give us the illusion of progress—like optimiz-

ing our health or building financial security. While some of these desires may seem beneficial, they often lead us away from the deeper work required for true transformation.

Part Two will explore the inner work necessary to become our strongest, most authentic self. But be warned: While we all want a better life, it will likely cost us the one we have.

The two key questions in this part are:

DEVELOPING A GROWTH MINDSET: Do I have hospitality for life's struggles?

NEEDING YOU TO NEED ME: How am I burdening others with my need for validation?

THREE. A DESIRE FOR INTIMACY: RESPONDING TO THE CLARION CALL TO LOVE AND BE LOVED

Part Three is written primarily for couples—those who are currently in, have been in, or hope to be in romantic relationships. Intimacy struggles are often seen as indicators of what is wrong in a relationship. In reality, they may be signs that the relationship is working exactly as it should. Relationship challenges have an uncanny way of exposing unsettling truths about us, and for that reason, they act as a clarion call—a strong and clear signal for couples to take action. If we avoid the call, the issues will persist; but if we heed it, we can begin to satisfy our deep need to love and be loved.

The two key questions of this section are:

CONFRONTING SABOTAGE: How am I sabotaging intimacy in my relationship?

CULTIVATING LOVE: How can I learn to love and be loved?

**FOUR. A DESIRE FOR PLEASURE:
DEVELOPING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP
TO OUR SEXUALITY**

It's no secret that most of us received inadequate sex education in adolescence and early adulthood. But the shortcomings of our education are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to how unprepared we are to navigate the incredible power of sex. Sex has the potential to reveal our deepest vulnerabilities, provoke us to make life-changing decisions, and heal us in ways we can't even begin to imagine. The complexity is that most of us have learned to use sex for the exact opposite reasons. We don't like our emotional and physical vulnerabilities revealed during sex; we resist the growth it can provoke; and so we either use it like an opiate to numb pain or avoid it altogether to protect ourselves from additional harm. Part Four will teach you how to experience sex that is revelatory, provocative, and ultimately healing.

The two key questions of the sexual knowledge chapters are:

SEX REVEALS WHAT I DESIRE AND FEAR: Will I allow sex to be a source of revelation?

ALLOWING SEX TO PROVOKE AND HEAL: How can I outgrow unhealthy sexual patterns and cultivate healthier ones?

**FIVE. A DESIRE FOR MEANING:
FINDING YOUR CALLING**

The final part of the book invites you to cultivate a life of meaning and purpose. Without a clear vision of where we want to go and the personal agency to get there, life can feel unfulfilling. In developing a holistic relationship with desire, we learn to outgrow our constant need for external validation through people and achievements. Instead, we learn to pursue desires that are not only authentic but also serve the common good. If you stay with me until the end, you'll discover how to chart a course toward a meaningful life, navigate inevitable setbacks,

and become a transitional character—someone who influences lasting change in their family and community.

The two key questions here are:

WAKING UP: What are the core traits I can develop to live a meaningful life?

CULTIVATING DESIRE: What are the key pillars of a meaningful life?

I SUSPECT ONE OR TWO of these five realms of desire will resonate most deeply with you, but I strongly encourage you to read all of them in order. Each part is integral to the others. If you don't know your story, you can't grow in authenticity. Without authenticity you can't experience intimacy. If intimacy is lacking in your romantic relationship, sexual pleasure will diminish. And if you're unsure who you are, meaninglessness will pervade your life.

Wholeness, Growth, Intimacy, Pleasure, and Purpose are not a carte menu items that we get to choose from. Think of them as a five-course meal, where each desire informs, builds on, and energizes the others. Because of this interconnectedness, some concepts will resurface throughout the book, allowing us to revisit and deepen our understanding of each desire.

As part of the research for this book, I developed a self-assessment to help you identify which desires are flourishing, which ones may be underdeveloped, and how you can chart a course for growth. You can access this self-assessment by visiting <https://www.holisticdesire.com>. It will score your responses and highlight areas of your desires that might need more attention. This assessment is optional and confidential.

Entering, and Choosing, a Critical Period

In treatment, many of my clients come to a surprising realization: They might not truly *want* to get well. It's not that they enjoy their suffering; quite the opposite. They've come to treatment because they recog-

nize that their former way of life has become untenable, a source of existential and relational dread. But soon into their journey, they discover that healing involves pain, learning requires unlearning, and growth entails anxiety. None of us is prepared for these challenges at the beginning. Thus, we find ourselves straddling two worlds—dead in one, powerless to be born in the other.²

Civil wars of desire can rage on for decades, if not a lifetime, if we don't choose to enter what's called a "critical period" of transformation. Neuroscientist Gul Dolen at Johns Hopkins University notes that critical periods are finite windows of time, ranging from days to years, when the brain is impressionable and open to new learning.³ While these periods occur most reliably (and unconsciously) during childhood—the time when songbirds learn to sing and humans learn to walk—we also have the potential to enter them in adulthood through intentionality or crisis. Falling in love, dedicating ourselves to prayer or spiritual practice, or immersing ourselves in a new culture can each be intentional ways to enter a critical period. Life will also ask us to travel through dismal places. But heartache and crisis alone are not enough to create a critical period. We must choose it.

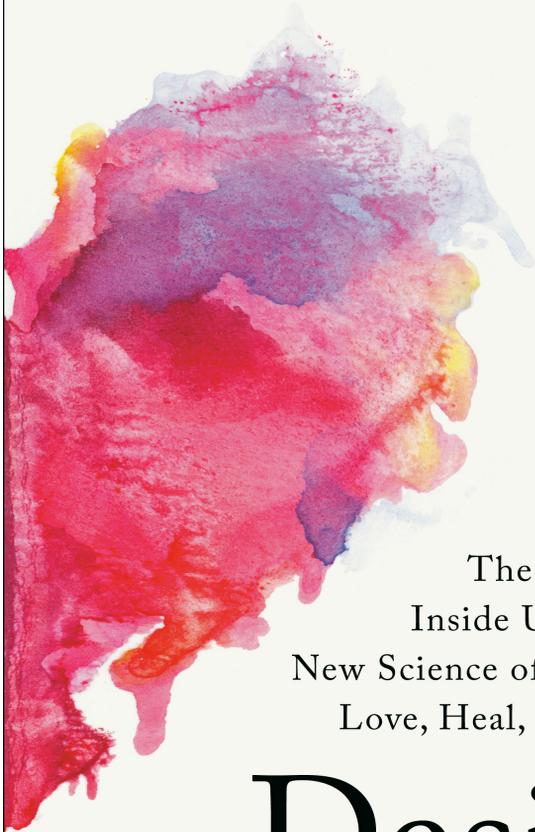
The life you desire will require you to let go of the life you've built. This book will guide you, but it will only be effective if something in your heart allows, even desires, a more curious and honest relationship with desire. Along the way, you should expect resistance. There will be fatigue, family drama, and crises of many kinds that will tempt you to turn back to the familiar. The truth is, there is never an ideal time for a critical period, because of the inevitable disruption it will usher in. But when you choose the path of growth, you're embarking on a journey that has the power to define your life.

The most effective way to enter a critical period is to be honest with yourself and at least one other trusted person about the confusion and difficulties you're facing. In a trauma-filled world, we become so accustomed to avoiding pain or chasing superficial pursuits that we don't even recognize all the ways our relationship with desire has been compromised. Change doesn't happen in abstraction; it requires us to carefully read the text of our story and share it with someone who cares.

From here, we will begin an excavation into the first of our five desires: a desire for wholeness. While I believe all five longings are foundational to a flourishing life, this first one may hold the deepest significance. Our childhood stories shape the quality, direction, and decisions of our adult lives in the most dramatic of ways, yet many of us have never taken the time to study them with the attention and care they deserve. It's time to learn your story and truly listen to your life.

JAY STRINGER

Bestselling author of UNWANTED



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