A CHAPTER FROM

GROUND

How to Lose Everything and Still Have Somewhere to Stand

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Shared freely. The whole book, and more writing, is at newphysician.org.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Self That Cannot Be Confiscated

WHEN YOU ARE TAKEN into custody, there is a process, and the process is designed, whether anyone intends it or not, to teach you a lesson about ownership.

They take your clothes and give you others. They take your name and give you a number. They take your watch, your ring, your belt, the small objects you did not know were holding your identity together until they were in a bag with a label on it. They take where you sleep and when you eat and when the lights go out and whether you may stand in this particular spot. Piece by piece, the apparatus removes everything you had come to think of as yourself.

And then it stops. Not because it grows merciful, but because it reaches a boundary it cannot cross. There is a point past which the confiscation cannot go, and discovering exactly where that point sits is one of the strangest and most valuable things that can happen to a human being.

They could take the watch but not my sense of time as something I experienced from the inside. They could take my name but not the awareness that was answering to the number. They could dictate every external fact of my day and still not reach the small, quiet thing that was observing the day and deciding, privately, what it meant. They could take my watch, and my phone, and my belt. But whether they took my dignity was up to me. Whether they took my mind was up to me. Whether they took my ideas was up to me. I had read about this in old books and thought I understood it. I did not understand it until it was the only thing I had left. Viktor Frankl, who survived far worse than I did and wrote the book that taught a century of readers this exact thing, put it in a single line that I could not improve and will not try to: that everything can be taken from a person but one thing, the last of the human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's response to whatever happens. I read that years ago and nodded at it the way you nod at a thing you have not yet earned. In the cell I finally earned it.

There is a name for the thing they could not reach, and it is worth giving you, because naming it turns it from a comfort into a tool. Call it the witness. Underneath the rush of your thoughts and feelings there is a quieter part of you that simply watches them go by. You are angry, and there is something in you that notices the anger. You are afraid, and something notices the fear. That noticing thing is not the anger and not the fear; it is the one observing them, and it does not rise and fall the way they do.

Most people live their whole lives identified with the weather, certain that they are the anger, the fear, the grief, swept off their feet each time a new one arrives. The practice is to step back, even slightly, into the part that is watching. You are not your anger. You are the one who is aware of it. That small shift, from being the feeling to being the one who notices the feeling, is the difference between drowning and standing in the shallows watching the wave come in. It was the witness they could not confiscate, because the witness is not a thing in the world. It is the one looking out at the world, and there is nowhere to put it in a bag.

There is a self underneath the one the world assembles for you, and it cannot be confiscated, because the people doing the confiscating cannot even locate it. They do not have the tools. No one does. It is not made of anything they can put in a bag.

This is not a religious claim, though you are welcome to bring your religion to it if you have one. It is closer to an observation, the kind you could almost call experimental, run under conditions most people never face. Strip a man of everything external and something remains that is doing the noticing. That remainder is the thing this whole book is pointing at. In the world we usually live in, it is impossible to see, buried as it is under job and title and reputation and the endless work of maintaining all three. It took losing every layer above it for me to feel it directly. I would not recommend my method. But I

cannot pretend it did not work.

If this found you at the right time

This is one short chapter from *Ground*, a book I wrote mostly by hand while I was still inside, and finished while the government was not yet finished with me. It is about what is left of a person when the things that defined them are gone.

I wrote it for anyone standing in the ruins of a life they thought was theirs. If that is you right now, or someone you love, I hope the rest of it holds some weight too.

The whole book, and more plain writing for people going through the federal process and the families beside them, is at newphysician.org.

I have also been making short videos there, free to watch, that walk through the federal process one step at a time, for the person inside it and the family standing beside them. If that is where you are, start with whichever one meets you where you stand.

The author has pleaded guilty to a federal offense and does not seek to relitigate his conviction or minimize his responsibility. This chapter reflects his own experience. It is not legal, medical, or psychological advice.