

PREFACE

Nearly a decade ago, we soaked in the beauty of Aria's wedding weekend in North East England. Our shared experience inspired us to find greater love and openness, not just in the enchanted setting of the English countryside, but in our daily lives. That desire led us to write the book you now hold in your hands.

A Mindful Year was written from January 1 to December 31, 2017, as a series of alternating letters to one another. While this process was incredibly helpful throughout those twelve months, it would turn out to be even more important for the years ahead. This period brought significant changes that neither of us could have foreseen, both in our personal lives and in the wider world. We would need these grounding practices more than we could have known.

The year that *A Mindful Year* was published, Aria's wife—whom he had written about in the book—told him that she'd been having an affair and that she was pregnant with the other man's child. The world that they had built together over ten years came crashing down like a house of cards. A few years later, Aria's dear brother Darius died suddenly and unexpectedly. A whirlwind of emotional pain ensued for him and his family.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Seth was dealing with

troubles of his own. The illness he describes in this book worsened, forcing him to drastically reduce his work hours, which led to financial struggles for his family and significant debt. Eventually, he found himself in a deep depression and often thought of ending his life.

The world changed around us too. Culture wars intensified, military wars began, and a racial reckoning started in the US in the middle of a global pandemic and lockdowns.

It was all the more important to find the healing that mindful awareness offers as we faced these internal and external struggles. The word *mindfulness* often conjures images of profound tranquility, and those are wonderful moments to enjoy. At the same time, mindful awareness is about truly being in our lives, just as they are. It doesn't involve denying any parts of ourselves or our experience with a facade of detached indifference. Mindfulness lives right where you live, whether there's joy or sorrow, hope or despair.

The peace of mindful presence is always available, even in the lonely uncertainty of an extended illness, in the broken pieces of a shattered marriage, in the loss of a beloved sibling, and in the seemingly hopeless depths of depression.

These trials reinforced for us the absolute necessity of having close connections to others, as new research from an eighty-five-year-long study at Harvard University has shown. Nothing is more important than having strong and close relationships for our emotional well-being, our physical health, and even our longevity.

Seth turned to his wife Marcia countless times through his struggles, and she lovingly responded with both practical and emotional support. He took comfort in his parents and brothers, as well, and deepened his relationships with friends.

During the emotional storm following the collapse of his marriage, Aria's brothers were the air in the life jacket that kept him afloat. Cyrus profoundly changed Aria's life and helped him

to start a new chapter. Aria moved in with him and his close friend Jack, and they supported him selflessly every day, helping him to find the light amid the darkness. Darius was always there when Aria needed him and will continue to be by his side, only now in spirit. Aria's family and closest friends, new and old, were the pillars that became the foundations of his new life.

The loss of Aria's brother brought a depth of emotional and spiritual pain that he had not experienced before. At the same time, the universe brought into his life Anna, the most beautiful, caring, kind, wise, thoughtful, and compassionate woman he had met. Their love grew like a lotus flower from the mud. Anna has been by his side since, gently and powerfully helping him to see the parts of his wounds that are still open and to continue on the path of healing.

We turned to each other when we were hurting too, through loving texts and video calls. Seth often shared with Aria the challenges he was dealing with, and Aria met him unfailingly with kindness and acceptance. The warmth and care that Aria showed would interrupt the downward physical and emotional spirals that Seth found himself in, leaving him feeling unburdened and free.

Seth was the rock that Aria could always turn toward, offering a depth of love and understanding that cast away all fear. His listening ear, compassionate heart, and wise words never failed to help Aria at the times of greatest need. Even when Aria felt as if he was falling into a hole, Seth's steady hand was there to help him back out.

The truth is that life can be as brutal as it is beautiful. We are all connected by our suffering, and we are all connected by love. No matter what you are going through right now, there is a way forward. While the emotional waves may be raging on the surface, deep within the sea of presence, stillness and serenity are waiting for you. We hope that this book will accompany you all through the year, on the good days and the bad, as you take one step at a time toward healing and peace.