

A Leap in Thought: Practical Handbook

From emptiness, anxiety, and exhaustion to finding your footing again

Zijun Fu · Civilization Leap Research Group

This book does not ask you to understand everything straight away.

It simply wants to stay beside you as you do something more important first:

bring yourself back, little by little, from feeling scattered, overwhelmed, empty, and anxious.

Copyright page

A Leap in Thought: Practical Handbook

Subtitle: From emptiness, anxiety, and exhaustion to finding your footing again

Author: Zijun Fu

Produced by: Civilization Leap Research Group

Version: v0.4 Framework-aligned revised edition

Official website: <https://www.civitas.top/en/>

Current entry point: <https://www.civitas.top/en/>

Contact email: zijunfu@civitas.top

About this handbook: This is a practical companion to Emergent Meaning Cosmology: A Leap in Thought, and an entry point for bringing the ideas of Civilization Leap into individual lives. It helps readers distinguish problems of survival, happiness, and meaning, and rediscover rhythm, relationships, judgment, and direction. It does not attribute every difficulty to the individual or treat personal adjustment as a complete answer to the problems of civilization. Reading it alongside the main book is recommended.

Copyright notice: Unless otherwise stated, the text of this manuscript is copyrighted by the author and producer. Please retain the author, producer, and version information when using it for publication, distribution, or courses.

Which state feels closest to where you are now?

If you are exhausted and can barely keep going: do not rush to understand everything. Find your footing first.

Suggested starting points: Chapters 1, 4, 12, and 15.

If you can keep living as you are, but feel increasingly empty: do not rush to try harder. Rediscover warmth and direction first. Suggested starting points: Chapters 1, 5, 7, 9, and 15.

If you are very anxious and easily swept up in things: hold off on major decisions. First distinguish what is happening and pause. Suggested starting points: Chapters 1, 3, 6, 12, and 15.

If you have begun to recognize something of yourself but still feel unsteady: do not rush to push harder. Give that small insight time to take root. Suggested starting points: Chapters 11, 13, 14, and 15.

How to use this book

You do not have to read it all at once or complete everything in order. Beginning with the part closest to your situation now is enough.

- If you have often felt tired, empty, or anxious lately, begin with Chapters 1 to 3.
- If you already know that you are not merely tired but have lost direction at a deeper level, focus on Chapters 7 to 11.
- If what you most need now is to know what to do first, go straight to Chapters 12 to 15 and return to the earlier sections later.
- You do not need to finish this handbook in one sitting. Start by taking in the chapter most useful to you now. That is enough.

The purpose of this handbook is not to train you to be more efficient. It is to help you understand what is happening, find your footing, and gradually stop losing yourself.

This handbook can be read on its own. To explore concepts such as primordial meaning and structural meaning further, read the relevant chapters of *Emergent Meaning Cosmology: A Leap in Thought* alongside it. The main book focuses more on direction and a conceptual framework; this handbook focuses more on exercises and practical application.

Contents

- Preface · You are not overthinking things; you need to find your footing again
- Chapter 1 · Is your main difficulty now about survival, happiness, or meaning?
- Chapter 2 · Why different kinds of suffering become tangled together
- Chapter 3 · Understand the problem before you act
- Chapter 4 · Rediscovering rhythm
- Chapter 5 · Rediscovering relationships
- Chapter 6 · Rediscovering judgment
- Chapter 7 · Rediscovering what you are unwilling to surrender
- Chapter 8 · How primordial meaning manifests in you
- Chapter 9 · Lived meaning: Why get up today?
- Chapter 10 · Structural meaning: Is your environment supporting you or wearing you down?
- Chapter 11 · Meaning in practice: How to tell whether you are really becoming steadier
- Chapter 12 · A week of practice: From confusion to a little more steadiness
- Chapter 13 · A monthly review: Gradually connecting scattered feelings
- Chapter 14 · How to talk about these questions with family, partners, and friends
- Chapter 15 · What to do first when you feel empty again
- Appendix 1 · A 30-day practice checklist
- Appendix 2 · Self-checks and writing pages
- Appendix 3 · A shared-reading outline
- Appendix 4 · Starting points for readers in different states

Preface

You are not overthinking things; you need to find your footing again

For many people, no major problem has suddenly appeared.

Life goes on. You may still have your job. Your relationships may not all be in trouble. From the outside, everything may even look fairly normal.

Yet an elusive feeling begins to return more often: tiredness, emptiness, anxiety, a lack of energy. You have never really stopped, but you are increasingly unsure where you are going.

At such times, people tend to tell themselves one of two things: “Perhaps I have just been too tired lately,” or “Am I overthinking things?”

Sometimes those thoughts are right. Often, though, they do not get to the root of the problem. What you are experiencing may be more than fatigue or emotional ups and downs. There may be a deeper imbalance: life continues, but your connection with yourself is weakening; there is still plenty to do, but you are less and less sure what is truly worthwhile; life may remain manageable, but you begin to wonder whether you are merely being kept in existence.

So this handbook is not here to tell you where you have fallen short. Nor is it here to force you to understand all of life at once. It wants to help you do something more important first: find your footing again.

Finding your footing does not mean discovering the ultimate answer all at once, immediately escaping every pain, or never feeling empty, anxious, or tired again. It means something more modest: beginning to distinguish what you are experiencing; recognizing which pains concern survival, which concern happiness, and which already touch questions of meaning; recovering a little rhythm, a little judgment, and a little of what you are unwilling to surrender; beginning to resist being swept away by confusion as a whole.

Many profound changes begin not with “I finally had a revelation,” but with “I finally stopped stumbling around blindly.”

This handbook is for moments like that. It is not a theory book, nor an attempt to supply a grand set of answers on your behalf. It is more like a book that accompanies you as you slowly sort things out for yourself.

If your greatest worry is that life may become impossible to sustain, begin with Chapter 1. If you have often felt empty and unmotivated lately, begin with Chapter 1 as well. If you already know that you are not simply tired but have lost direction at a deeper level, Chapter 1 is still the recommended starting point.

Before you can really move forward, what you need most is not to be overwhelmed by more grand explanations. It is to distinguish the elements of the situation in front of you. Many people do have a way forward; when their suffering becomes tangled, they simply cannot see which step to take first.

So the first thing this handbook does is not encourage, comfort, or cheer you on. It is to work with you to distinguish the problems. A way forward becomes visible when you can tell them apart.

Some difficulties can be eased through rest, repairing relationships, and taking stock of yourself. Others arise from work structures, systems of evaluation, resource pressures, and relationship environments that continually drain people. This handbook helps you find your footing, but it does not ask you to shoulder every structural problem alone. A leap in thought can begin with the individual, but it will not place civilization's problems back on the individual's shoulders.

Chapter 1

Is your main difficulty now about survival, happiness, or meaning?

At their most difficult moments, people often know that they are suffering but cannot tell what they are suffering from. Of course you can feel it: exhausted, irritated, empty, anxious, unable to find energy, increasingly impatient, increasingly reluctant to speak, or alone even when others are nearby.

The problem is that these feelings often become mixed together. You begin to wonder: Am I too fragile? Am I not trying hard enough? Would a rest make everything better? Do I even have the right to complain when other people have it harder? These thoughts can make you more confused.

Often, what you really need is not to pull yourself together immediately. It is first to distinguish whether your main difficulty now concerns survival, happiness, or meaning.

For example, someone may think they are simply “too tired from work.” A closer look may show that what is wearing them down is not only the workload but a long absence of rest and warmth in relationships, with life reduced to getting by. On the surface it looks like a work problem; at its core it may be a neglected problem of happiness.

You do not need to get this assessment exactly right. Simply ask yourself: What troubles me most now: the fear of falling, a life that feels increasingly cold, or an increasing inability to say why I keep going? Identifying the heaviest layer is enough for now.

When your main difficulty is survival, what you fear most is falling. Your first concerns are whether you have enough money, whether you can keep your job, and how you will cope if rent, loans, children, elderly relatives, medical needs, or unexpected events bear down on you. It is not that you have no deeper questions; you have no energy left to ask them. The first step in a survival problem is not revelation. It is establishing a safety net and stopping the slide.

When your main difficulty is happiness, life is not impossible, but its warmth is fading. You may be able to carry on, and may even look fine from the outside, yet increasingly you feel there is nothing to look forward to, that you have not truly relaxed for a long time, or that no one has really listened. The first step in a happiness problem is not trying harder. It is gradually restoring relationships, rhythm, peace, and warmth to life.

When your main difficulty is meaning, you can keep going but find it increasingly hard to say why. It is not that you have nothing to do, but that you do not know why you are doing it. It is not that you have no pleasure, but that you feel emptier once the pleasure passes. The first step in a meaning problem is not finding the ultimate answer immediately. It is rediscovering what you are truly unwilling to surrender.

In real life, many people face more than one of these difficulties. All three may be present: survival is not fully secure, happiness has long been neglected, and questions of meaning have already surfaced. This is when people most easily reach for the wrong remedy. Facing a survival problem, they force themselves to figure out all of life. Facing a happiness problem, they assume working harder will solve it. Facing a meaning problem, they keep trying to fill the gap with fleeting pleasures and stimulation.

The aim of this chapter is not to analyze or define you, but to help separate the confusion in front of you just a little. Even that small distinction can show you: not everything in me is broken; I am stuck at a particular level. I am not inadequate as a whole person; I have been using the wrong approach.

The survival, happiness, and meaning problems discussed here are three starting points for individuals to assess their current situation. Civilization Leap proposes three civilization-level outcome coordinates: secure survival for humanity as a whole, happiness in individual lives, and greater meaning in life. These two sets correspond, but they are not identical. Individuals can begin by sorting through their own circumstances. When large numbers of people repeatedly face the same difficulties over a long period, however, the problem is no longer merely personal. It has entered the structural and civilizational levels.

Chapter 2

Why different kinds of suffering become tangled together

When people are most exhausted, their suffering is often not too clear but too tangled. You know you feel bad, yet cannot say exactly what is wrong.

Usually, the reality is not “one cause produces one kind of suffering.” Several problems at different levels are layered together. They pull on and amplify one another until everything feels wrong.

One kind of suffering may be bearable; the frightening part is how they accumulate. Suppose you have been tired lately. On the surface, there is too much work. Looking deeper, that work may have crowded out rest; too little rest leaves you less energy for relationships; as those relationships grow distant, you feel emptier inside; and as that emptiness grows, your activities seem less worthwhile.

Survival problems are easiest to see and easiest to underestimate. They do not necessarily crush you all at once. More often, they keep taking up space in you: your attention, your body, your sense of security. Little by little, they diminish the energy you could otherwise give to love, thought, rest, and growth.

Happiness problems often seem insufficiently “serious.” You can still work and keep life going, but you have not truly relaxed, been carefully heard, or felt even a little anticipation for tomorrow in a long time. It is like a room with the lights off: it will not collapse immediately, but its warmth slowly drains away.

Meaning problems are hardest to recognize. They often disguise themselves as “I have just been off my game lately.” You still do things, respond to others, and plan tomorrow. Yet it becomes harder to say: Why am I alive? Where is all this activity leading?

Many people find things especially hard not because they are inadequate, but because they have never been carrying just one burden. The easiest mistake is then to use one approach to deal with a problem that belongs to a different level.

Understand the problem before you act. The first task is not to rally, find an answer, or force yourself to be stronger. First distinguish what troubles you most: fear of falling, loss of warmth, or a deeper loss of direction. Once you can make even a small distinction, a way forward begins to appear.

Chapter 3

Understand the problem before you act

When people feel bad, their first response is often to fix it quickly: adjust their routine, force themselves to rally, go for a walk, make plans, read, talk to someone, change jobs, or move to another city. But without distinguishing what you are actually experiencing, many actions end up as blind stumbling.

You may most need a safety net, yet force yourself to make sense of life. You may most need warmth and relationships, yet assume that working harder and being more disciplined will solve things. You may already be facing a question of meaning, yet keep filling the gap with activity, stimulation, and novelty.

Much “immediate action” is really an immediate rush toward the most superficial symptoms. Symptoms certainly affect people. But if you keep working only at that level, you increasingly feel: I am always doing something, yet never touching the real problem.

If your main difficulty now is survival, do not rush toward higher answers. First stop the slide and stabilize the most precarious part. Let yourself stop living constantly at the edge of a fall.

If your main difficulty now is happiness, the first step is often not to do more, but to restore a little warmth: a meal without rushing, a quiet walk, a conversation in which you do not have to explain yourself, or a regular stretch of quiet time.

If your main difficulty now is meaning, the first step is not to find the ultimate answer at once, but to stop trying to fill the gap indiscriminately. Ask: When have I most often felt suddenly empty lately? Am I losing interest, or losing direction?

Effective action is not about pushing harder, but about moving in a more fitting direction. You do not have to overhaul your life immediately. You only need the next step to stop carrying you further off course.

This chapter leaves you with one judgment: understand the problem before you act. Often people are not unable to stand up; they have simply been directing their effort the wrong way.

Chapter 4

Rediscovering rhythm

Many people think that what they really lack is motivation. Often, though, what is missing first is rhythm. Your strength is not absent; it is scattered. You do want to move forward, but your day is cut into so many pieces that neither mind nor body ever truly settles.

What gradually brings people back is rarely passion. More often, it is rhythm. Rhythm is like breathing: undramatic, unobtrusive, even ordinary. Precisely because it is ordinary, it can remain with you.

When rhythm is lost, people do not collapse all at once. Their boundaries fade gradually: work pushes them through the day, scrolling carries them toward sleep at night, meals become more haphazard, rest feels increasingly like compensation, and weekends offer no real relaxation, only a switch from one kind of busyness to another kind of scatteredness.

Without rhythm, happiness and meaning struggle to grow. Happiness does not grow out of being torn apart, and meaning does not suddenly appear while you are constantly being driven onward. Both need a basic container in everyday life, and rhythm is part of that container.

Rediscovering rhythm does not mean controlling life more tightly. It means gently drawing life back a little from complete disorder. What matters is not how much you do, but whether there is one small, regular place that lets you return to yourself.

If everything feels chaotic now, do not try to organize your entire life at once. Recover just one rhythm first: sleeping, eating, quiet time, or walking. Begin with whichever is easiest to restore.

Try a minimal seven-day rhythm repair: choose one regular point that is easiest to maintain and keep it for seven days, without judging success or failure. On the seventh day, answer just three questions: On which day did I feel a little steadier? What was this small rhythm least easily disrupted by? Am I willing to continue for another seven days?

The first thing you gain when rhythm returns may not be happiness, but the feeling that you are “less scattered.” That already matters. Deeper things such as relationships, warmth, judgment, direction, and meaning struggle to grow when a person's life is completely dispersed.

Chapter 5

Rediscovering relationships

Many people feel increasingly empty not only because they are tired, but because it has been so long since they were truly close to anyone. There may be people around, but few really get through. There may be plenty of conversation, but little of what they say is truly heard.

The hardest part of a lack of connection is that it does not always appear as “I am lonely.” More often, it takes other forms: I am easily irritated lately; I am growing impatient; I am less and less willing to talk. You may think you are simply not quite yourself at the moment. Often, though, what lies behind those feelings is not merely tiredness but a long absence of genuine connection.

Many people have plenty of opportunities to be useful: people come to them at work, depend on them at home, and remember them when friends need something. But being used and being needed are not the same. Being used often means that you serve a particular function. Being needed goes deeper: “Your presence here, as this person, matters.”

When relationships fade, life may not immediately run into trouble, but it gradually becomes thinner. You still eat, work, and get through the days, yet places that should once have resonated begin to return no echo.

Rediscovering relationships does not mean suddenly having many people in your life. It means restoring one or two connections in which real relationship can happen. Sometimes one person with whom you can talk seriously matters more than ten lively gatherings.

A few questions can help you judge whether a relationship has warmth: Can I relax a little with this person? When I speak honestly, will I be received gently? Does this relationship exist for more than my usefulness? Does it help me feel more like myself?

The most important principle in restoring relationships is not to take on too many. Begin with one. It might be an old friend, a family member, or someone who feels relatively safe and likely to receive you well. The point is not to repair the relationship beautifully, but to experience once more that connection really can go beyond the surface.

Not every relationship is ready for a deep conversation all at once. If you are unsure whether the other person is safe or able to receive what you say, do not force it. Write it down first, speak to someone more dependable, or share only one small layer. Honesty does not mean opening everything at once. In unsafe relationships, boundaries matter more than full disclosure.

For example, feeling increasingly empty may make someone want an immediate, deep conversation with a family member from whom they have long been distant. Yet that relationship has always felt unsafe, and every deeper conversation brings dismissal. The steadier approach is not to force the conversation, but to find someone more able to receive them and first practice speaking honestly there.

Rediscovering relationships does not mean suddenly surrounding yourself with many people. It means having one relationship again in which you do not always have to carry everything alone. From there, warmth can slowly return to life.

Chapter 6

Rediscovering judgment

Many people are not short of ideas. They are finding it harder to distinguish which ideas are truly their own and which are being poured in from outside.

You may feel that you make decisions every day, yet more decisions do not necessarily bring more clarity. Sometimes they bring more confusion: you consume plenty of content but still do not know what you really think; you hear plenty of advice but still do not know what you really want.

Often, what you lack first is not information but judgment. This is not simply the ability to choose; it is the inner strength to slow down, discern, and resist being pushed immediately into motion.

Modern life offers many ways to skip judgment: systems recommend for you, platforms rank things for you, acquaintances reach conclusions for you, and public opinion decides what you should like and dislike. Over time, you become used to checking what others say before deciding what you think.

More options do not necessarily make people freer. Sometimes they make people more scattered, because more options require more judgment. Without judgment, options eventually produce wavering rather than freedom.

Judgment can weaken because you have not truly been quiet for too long; because you have not seriously endured “not knowing” for too long; because you have lived in comparison for too long; and because you have not asked yourself what you genuinely cannot give up for too long.

Deep judgment is often slow. It is more like clarity gradually surfacing. This is “slow judgment”: not procrastination, but refusing to let the loudest, fastest, most answer-like voice take over immediately. Pause first and ask: “Is this really what I want?” “Without comparison and anxiety, would I still choose this?”

For example, you see someone suddenly change careers, move cities, or restart their life, and immediately want to overturn everything in your own life. Slow judgment does not mean suppressing the impulse. It means asking first: Is this a path I truly want, or has someone else's pace merely ignited my anxiety?

Rediscovering judgment does not mean knowing everything immediately. It means no longer letting every voice determine you at once. Slow down a little, narrow the scope a little, be a little more honest, and begin with one very small judgment in your day. Often people do not suddenly rediscover themselves at a grand moment. They gradually bring themselves back through repeated judgments that are less loud but more truly their own.

Chapter 7

Rediscovering what you are unwilling to surrender

When people talk about “finding themselves,” they often look outward: for interests, passions, talents, a calling. Yet a person's deepest direction often comes into view not by first asking “What do I like most?” but by asking “What am I truly unwilling to surrender?”

There are things you do not talk about every day, and may rarely have tried to define. But as soon as they are touched, you know: this cannot be treated casually. This cannot be judged only by what is convenient. If I give ground here, I will feel that I have lost a piece of myself as well.

“What I like” can change, and can easily become entangled with other people's expectations. “What I am unwilling to surrender” often runs deeper and holds steadier. It emerges through encounters and collisions, rather than through imagination.

Common examples of what people are unwilling to surrender include sincerity, dignity, loyalty, boundaries they will not cross, a refusal to let life go to waste, and the irreplaceable significance of a particular relationship. These may not amount to a complete answer, but they often reveal something of our roots.

People often lose these things little by little, not because they deliberately choose to betray themselves, but because life gradually wears them away. When busy, people are most likely to let go of what is genuine first. When tired, they are most likely to compromise their boundaries first. When afraid, they are most likely to protect appearances first.

One simple question is: if I keep living this way, what kind of person am I most afraid of becoming? Your answer often holds many clues. The person you most fear becoming is often the opposite of what your life most needs to preserve.

Try an exercise called “Three Things I Cannot Treat Casually”: What things can I not treat casually? Whom can I not treat casually? What path can I not casually abandon? You do not need a complete account. A rough outline is enough.

For example, some people cannot treat sincerity casually, cannot treat their family casually, and cannot treat their own boundaries casually. Your answers do not need to be grand. They only need to be true.

Often, your real direction begins to emerge not from “What do I like most?” but from “What am I truly unwilling to surrender?” Once you begin to recognize these things again, you are already no longer completely lost.

Chapter 8

How primordial meaning manifests in you

Strictly speaking, the things in your life that feel worth holding on to, that you are unwilling to surrender lightly, and that repeatedly call you back are not primordial meaning itself. They are finite impressions left in the human heart as primordial meaning enters an individual life. Emergent Meaning Cosmology: A Leap in Thought calls the earliest of these impressions, those closest to a higher direction, “first-reflected meaning.” This practical handbook does not ask you to understand the entire theory first. We begin simply by recognizing these impressions in moments that hurt, light something up within you, bring you to a stop, or make you unwilling to give ground casually.

Primordial meaning often first appears as “I cannot do this”: I cannot treat this relationship solely in terms of its function. I cannot, for the sake of convenience, become someone who puts less and less care into living. I cannot know that something is wrong and still pretend it does not matter.

It also often appears as “This is difficult, but I cannot let it go.” Taking someone seriously may be exhausting, yet you are unwilling to turn the relationship into mere going through the motions. Holding a particular boundary may put you at a disadvantage, yet you still know that you cannot move that line.

For example, someone may know that “doing the work with care” does not pay off in certain environments, yet still refuse to become increasingly careless in how they live. This may be more than a stubborn disposition. It may be primordial meaning reminding them that some things cannot be judged only by convenience.

Some moments hurt especially deeply. That is not necessarily only a sign of fragility; something deeper may have been touched. When you are treated dismissively, what hurts is not just the remark itself, but the contempt for your whole person that it conveys. When you are betrayed, the pain is not just losing someone. A line you believed must not be casually crossed has, in fact, been crossed.

Primordial meaning can also appear in moments of light: someone truly understands you, and something inside you suddenly settles; you complete something with care, and in that moment you feel, “This was not for nothing”; you speak a truth, and although it is not easy, you feel steadier afterward.

Primordial meaning is not a set of slogans. It is more like a place you keep returning to. You may take a long detour and still return here. You may spend a long time being pushed along and still, in the end, return here.

Try a simple exercise: recall three moments of “I cannot do this” and three moments of “Yes, this is it.” Look for a recurring thread among them. That recurring thread may well be part of your primordial meaning.

Primordial meaning is not a slogan you invent later. It is more like those things in your life that repeatedly make you pause, hurt, light up, and refuse to give them away casually. Once you begin to see them seriously, you are no longer simply flailing in a void.

Chapter 9

Lived meaning: Why get up today?

Lived meaning does not manufacture motivation for you, or use a higher goal to keep you pushing past your limits. The questions it really addresses are these: here and now, what is still worthwhile? What is no longer worth continuing? What needs to be protected? What needs to change? Meaning is not a tool for making people function more efficiently. It helps them reconsider the direction of their lives.

When people think of “meaning,” they often instinctively imagine something distant: a great ideal, a lofty calling, a complete answer to life. Yet meaning often does not first approach you from far away. More often, it first takes its place in today.

It takes its place in why you get out of bed today, why you keep going, why you are still willing to do the task in front of you a little better, and why, even when no one is watching, you do not want to live too carelessly.

Many people find “getting out of bed today” increasingly difficult. This does not necessarily mean you have become lazy. Often, your connection to “why today is worth continuing” has weakened.

Lived meaning is not a lofty principle. It is whether today has some substance: Why am I getting out of bed today? Why do I not want to keep going through the motions today? Why am I willing to give this meal my attention and finish it today?

“Doing a lot of things” and “having a meaningful day” are not the same. Doing many things shows that you are functioning. Having a meaningful day shows that you are living. Functioning can be highly efficient; living must connect with something worthwhile.

A reason to keep going today does not have to rest on an ambitious goal. Sometimes it rests on a small but genuine reason: someone is waiting for me at home; I no longer want to live with so little care; I promised myself that I could not keep unraveling like this forever.

Lived meaning is not “making me happy every day.” It is “keeping this day from going to waste.” Even if today is ordinary, if one or two things in it connect with what you truly cherish, the day is not empty.

Try the smallest possible exercise: find a reason for today. Not a reason for your entire life, just for today. Why will I keep going today? What thread do I most want to keep from breaking today? Often, people move forward not because they have every answer, but because today still holds one reason worth getting out of bed for. For example: today I want to gather myself back together a little; today I do not want to keep treating my relationship with someone only in terms of its function; today I want at least one small part of life to be more than merely getting by.

Chapter 10

Structural meaning: Is your environment supporting you or wearing you down?

Not every problem originates in the individual. Some exhaustion comes from disrupted rhythms, while other exhaustion comes from a structure that continually depletes people. The maturity of a structure depends not only on whether it completes tasks, but also on whether it allows real people to retain judgment, relationships, dignity, a way forward, and a future.

When more and more people, across different jobs, cities, and stages of life, repeatedly experience the same hollowness, displacement, and meaninglessness, the problem is no longer that a few individuals have failed to adjust. Something has gone wrong in civilization's structures for generating and sustaining meaning. A leap in thought begins with the individual, but Civilization Leap must address this question: how can shared life itself stop continually producing the same kinds of loss?

When people speak of “meaning,” they often instinctively think of it as something deeply personal. But if this is our only understanding, we can easily take every problem upon ourselves: I am not clear enough, not mature enough, not good enough at thinking things through.

Often, the problem lies not only within you but also in your environment. “Structural meaning” here concerns whether your work, relationships, organization of time, and digital environment are holding you up or slowly wearing you down. The pace of work you live with, the structures of your relationships, the ways your time is divided, and the systems by which you are evaluated all quietly affect you. They can support you, or they can deplete you.

Some problems are not “personal problems.” A workplace that continually fragments, interrupts, rushes, and quantifies people makes it increasingly difficult for them to find quiet. An evaluation system that considers only outcomes, overlooking people and the significance of the process, makes people increasingly feel as though they are performing a function. An educational environment that develops only adaptation and efficiency, rather than judgment and a sense of direction, can teach people to charge ahead without necessarily knowing why.

Work does more than provide an income. It also shapes how you live: how your time is divided; whether there is room to breathe in your day; whether you are respected or continually squeezed; and whether, after a day's work, you are left with something of substance within you or only exhaustion.

Education does more than teach people how to do things. It also shapes whether they can exercise judgment. A system that teaches you only how to pass and how to gain recognition may have taught you very little about how to live.

Your relational environment is itself a structure. The emotional climate of the relationships you live in over time has a profound effect on the state of your life. A family concerned only with function and not with feelings, or interactions concerned only with performance and not with understanding, can gradually teach a person to hide the deepest parts of themselves.

Your digital environment is also quietly shaping you. Phones, platforms, recommendation feeds, short-form content, notifications, and algorithmic rankings do more than provide content. They also set a pace, direct attention, and establish levels of emotional intensity. They can make it increasingly difficult to think something through fully, and increasingly difficult to hear yourself without external input.

To judge whether an environment supports or depletes you, ask five questions: Does it make me steadier or more scattered? Does it help me feel more like myself or take me further from myself? Does it protect my rhythms, judgment, and relationships, or continually interrupt them? Am I genuinely needed, or simply being used efficiently? Does it help me develop substance, or only keep depleting myself?

For example, someone may already see that the structure of their work continually wears them down, while being unable to leave for practical reasons. A steadier first step is not to force themselves to restart their entire life immediately, but to reduce the amount of time work continues to consume after hours, preserving a short period of genuine quiet and recovery that belongs to them.

How can you limit a structure's erosion of your life when you cannot yet change it? Do not rush to demand that you escape it completely. Start with four more practical steps: reduce unnecessary exposure to what drains you internally; do not interpret all the damage caused by the structure as "I am not good enough"; rebuild a small area of support, such as one person, a regular stretch of time, or a steadier anchor in daily life; and protect your most basic rhythms, relationships, and quiet so that you are not pulled apart altogether.

You cannot immediately replace every environment, but you can begin by seeing them clearly. Once you do, at least you will no longer keep misunderstanding yourself. Seeing clearly is not the end, but it is the beginning of reorganizing your life.

Chapter 11

Meaning in practice: How to tell whether you are really becoming steadier

To judge whether you are genuinely becoming steadier, you cannot look only at whether you feel comfortable, positive, less anxious, or more motivated. You must also ask: Are your relationships becoming more authentic? Is your judgment less easily swept along by external pressures? Are your actions reducing ongoing harm to yourself and others? Is your life gradually taking on a sustainable direction, rather than merely producing a brief burst of excitement? Meaning in practice must ultimately enter action, relationships, consequences, and feedback over time.

When people first begin to change, one of their greatest anxieties is: am I actually getting any better? Change is not an exam. It does not immediately give you a score, much less announce, “Congratulations, you have recovered.”

The most dependable changes are often quiet. One day, you may simply discover that you no longer fall apart quite so easily. Or, in a moment that would once have engulfed your whole self, this time you manage to pause.

“Feeling a little better” certainly matters, but feelings fluctuate. If you focus only on how you feel, every unsettled moment can make you think your efforts were wasted. What meaning in practice asks is not “Am I in a great mood today?” but whether the state of your life is gradually becoming steadier.

Becoming steadier does not mean you no longer hurt. Steadiness does not really mean “always feeling positive.” It means those feelings no longer swallow you whole at once. You are beginning to develop a capacity to hold them within yourself.

Changes in everyday life often show up first in four areas: Are you less easily scattered? Are you better able to tell things apart? Are you betraying yourself less often? Do you have a slightly clearer sense of why you keep going?

Some changes look small but matter a great deal: this time, when exhausted, you did not keep pushing yourself too far; this time, when you felt empty, you did not immediately reach for stimulation to fill it; this time, you finally told someone a little of the truth. All of these count.

Looking back is not a test of whether you are good enough. It helps you see small changes that have already happened but are easy to overlook. Try a weekly reflection: When was I most easily scattered this week? In what moment was I a little steadier than before? Where did I feel a little more like myself? What is still worth continuing to protect?

Change in everyday life does not mean you will never hurt again. It means you are becoming less easily scattered and are beginning to betray yourself less. That is steadiness. Not a flash of light, a peak experience, or a sudden revelation, but the fact that, little by little, you are finally beginning to hold yourself together.

Chapter 12

A week of practice: From confusion to a little more steadiness

When people think of “practice,” they often tense up, imagining another schedule, daily check-ins, and demands for perseverance. Let us be clear from the start: this week of practice is not intended to train you to be more efficient. It has only one purpose: to move from chaos to standing a little more steadily.

Before you begin, make just one assessment: at which level does your main difficulty lie right now? Is it a problem of survival, happiness, or meaning? If survival weighs most heavily, the week's focus is halting the slide, securing basic support, and reducing pressure. If happiness weighs most heavily, the focus is restoring warmth, rhythm, relationships, and a sense of being alive. If meaning weighs most heavily, the focus is reducing indiscriminate attempts to fill the emptiness and recovering a slightly truer sense of direction. If your greatest difficulty right now is survival, this week emphasizes “basic support” and “halting the slide.” If your greatest difficulty is happiness, this week emphasizes “warmth” and “rhythm.” If your greatest difficulty is meaning, this week emphasizes “stopping indiscriminate filling” and “recovering that thread.”

Do only three things this week: recover one fixed point each day; leave yourself one honest sentence each day; and do one small thing each day that keeps you from betraying yourself further. Do not add a lot of extra tasks. Adding too many will take you back to the old pattern of trying to change everything at once.

The seven-day path can be simple: on day one, see a little more clearly; on day two, recognize what most easily pulls you apart; on day three, bring a little warmth back into life; on day four, interrupt one attempt to fill the emptiness indiscriminately; on day five, write down “what I am unwilling to surrender”; on day six, find a reason for today; on day seven, look back rather than rush to give yourself a score.

If there are days during the week when you do not manage it, do not immediately conclude that you are incapable. Not doing it every time does not mean what you did was wasted. You are not proving how disciplined you are. You are practicing how to find your footing again.

After a week, what matters most is not “keep trying harder” but “keep being honest”: honestly recognize what you need most right now; honestly acknowledge that you are not yet fully steady; honestly protect a little of what you are unwilling to surrender.

Standing a little more steadily does not come from one dramatic restart. It comes from the small, genuine actions of a week, bringing you back to yourself little by little.

Chapter 13

A monthly review: Gradually connecting scattered feelings

For many people, the problem is not an absence of change but how fragmented it is. Today things are a little clearer; tomorrow they are a little more confused. A few days ago, you felt that you had finally found a thread to hold on to; a couple of days later, everything seems hazy again.

Real change rarely emerges all at once in a tidy form. More often, it begins as scattered moments: moments when you are a little steadier than before, moments when you do not betray yourself quite so easily, moments when you suddenly feel, “This was not a day wasted.”

Without taking stock, those moments can easily sink out of sight again. Then you wonder: have I changed at all? Often, what you need is not more effort but a chance to gather things together.

A monthly review is more useful than watching yourself every day. Deep changes are not clear on a daily basis. Often, you need a little distance before you can see them.

After a month, do not begin with “Am I completely better?” Begin with “What have I noticed?” Seeing matters more than reaching a conclusion.

As you review, first look for three kinds of recurrence: Where do I repeatedly come apart? Where do I repeatedly light up, even briefly? Where am I repeatedly unwilling to give ground? These points of unraveling, moments of light, and places where you refuse to retreat will gradually point toward things they share.

One simple monthly review consists of five questions: Where did I most often come apart this month? Where did I most often light up, even briefly? Where am I most unwilling to keep giving ground? If I look at all of this together, what is the clearest thread in my life right now? What one small thing do I most want to protect in the coming month?

A monthly review does not have to produce a complete summary immediately. Sometimes all it gives you is one sentence truer than any you had before. That is already valuable. Taking stock is not about fixing yourself into a rigid definition. It is about no longer living in a perpetually scattered state. It simply helps you gather, a little, what genuinely matters at this stage: to stop letting it keep slipping away, and to leave the person you are right now a small, real place to stand.

Chapter 14

How to Talk About These Questions with Family, Partners, and Friends

Once people begin to see a little more clearly for themselves, a natural next question arises: how do I talk about this with the people around me? This is not because you suddenly want to lecture them. It is because, once these questions truly enter everyday life, they cannot remain forever confined to your own heart.

Yet the thought of talking can immediately leave you stuck: you do not know how to begin; you worry you will not explain it clearly, that the other person will not understand, that it will sound like complaining, or that they will simply say, “You're overthinking it.”

Many people ultimately choose not to talk. Or they say a few things on the surface while pushing what runs deeper back down. But many problems do not disappear when left unspoken. They take other forms: silence, impatience, fewer and fewer attempts to explain.

The greatest danger in these conversations is not a failure to understand, but moving into “solution mode” too quickly. Often, you may not need to be fixed immediately. You may first want to be heard. A conversation needs room for you before it needs a plan.

How do you begin? Start with life, rather than opening with concepts. For example: “Nothing major has happened lately, but I often suddenly feel empty,” or “I'm not just tired. It's more that I don't know why I'm always rushing like this.” Familiar, honest, unintimidating language makes it easier for the other person to know where to meet you.

Different people call for different emphases. With a partner, the point is not to prove you are right, but to help them understand what has been happening to you, what you need most, and how it relates to your relationship. With family, do not ask for deep understanding all at once. Start with one small step. With friends, the point is to open the door to “I've actually wanted to say something real for a long time.”

If the relationship does not yet feel safe enough, do not rush to go too deep. Some relationships are not impossible to talk within; they are simply not ready for the deepest conversation all at once. If you already know that the other person easily dismisses, diminishes, or misunderstands you, the steadier choice is not to force the conversation. Say a little less at first, write it down, or practice expressing yourself with someone better able to support you. Not every truth has to be spoken in one sitting.

If the other person does not understand, do not rush toward either of two extremes: shutting yourself off completely or immediately demanding that they become more capable of understanding. First acknowledge that the disappointment is real. Then distinguish between “they could not meet me this time” and “this person will never be able to meet me.” After that, decide whether the next step is to try different words or to speak with someone else. If, halfway through, it becomes clear that the other person cannot engage, it is all right to pause. This does not mean you said something wrong. It simply means this relationship cannot, at this moment, hold something so deep.

The purpose of talking about these questions is not to explain yourself perfectly. It is to allow something real into a relationship at last. Many deeper relationships slowly begin right here.

When your difficulties arise mainly from persistent financial pressure, an abusive relationship, serious health problems, exploitation at work, or long-term institutional oppression, do not try to carry the entire burden through writing and self-reflection alone. This practical handbook can help you distinguish what is happening and find your footing, but practical support, professional help, legal protection, a reliable foundation of resources, and structural change are also necessary.

Chapter 15

What to do first when you feel empty again

Many problems do not disappear forever just because you have thought them through once. You may already have learned to distinguish them, recovered some rhythm, relationships, and judgment, and even had moments when you genuinely felt less scattered than before. Yet one day, the emptiness can suddenly return.

At such a time, people are most likely to do two things. First, they immediately turn against themselves: was everything I did before for nothing? Second, they immediately try to fill the void indiscriminately: quickly find some bustle, stimulation, or a new plan to push this feeling down.

Both reactions are natural, and both can easily take you back into old patterns. The most important task of this chapter is therefore not to teach you “how never to feel empty again,” but to explain what to do first when emptiness returns.

Feeling empty again does not mean your journey was wasted. Do not rush to a conclusion: emptiness does not mean you have made no progress. Recurrence is part of the process. The key is not whether it returns, but whether you are beginning to recognize it sooner and are less likely to be swallowed by it whole.

Do not begin with the “big questions.” Begin with “Which level have I fallen into right now?” Is it survival, happiness, or meaning? Once you make even a small distinction, the emptiness is no longer completely leading you around.

Do not immediately reach for something to fill it. First, interrupt one automatic response. You were about to keep scrolling for another half hour; this time, pause. You were about to set yourself an even bigger plan; this time, do not. That pause matters. It moves you from sliding automatically into a pattern to being able to choose again.

Do not make major decisions while feeling empty. Do not decide to quit your job, end a relationship, or suddenly restart your life at the moment you feel emptiest. The most appropriate actions are the smallest: drink a glass of water, walk for ten minutes, leave room for one unhurried meal today, or send someone you trust one relatively honest sentence.

You can return to three very simple questions: What am I most afraid of right now? What am I missing most right now? What is the smallest genuine thing I can do first? These questions can gradually bring that “vast, hollow sense of collapse” back to a size you can still hold.

When emptiness returns, do not first force yourself to understand everything. First, bring yourself back a little. Often, people slowly find solid ground not because they never feel empty again, but because, each time the emptiness returns, they finally begin to know how to stop losing themselves further.

Further Reading

If you would like to continue taking stock of your own life, read the relevant chapters of Emergent Meaning Cosmology: A Leap in Thought and The Human Heart. If you would like to understand why many personal problems repeatedly become social problems, turn to Volumes I and II of Civilization Leap. If you would like to understand how meaning enters relationships, institutions, and communities, continue with Meaning Dynamics and Volume III of Civilization Leap. If you would like to understand why AGI will amplify these problems, read the relevant volumes of Civilization Leap and the related texts of The Only Path.

These readings do not follow a fixed sequence. What matters is not finishing every manuscript, but knowing where to take your next question. Personal difficulties call for personal reflection, as well as relational and practical support. Shared difficulties that recur call for understanding and change at the structural and civilizational levels.

Appendix 1

A 30-day practice checklist

This is not a daily completion challenge or a way to prove how disciplined you are. It is more like a light-touch checklist for “bringing yourself back, little by little.” It has only three principles: you do not have to do everything; you do not have to do it perfectly; you only have to be genuine. You do not need to do the same things for all 30 days. If survival is your greatest concern right now, lean more toward actions that secure basic support. If happiness is your greatest concern, lean more toward rhythm, warmth, and relationships. If meaning is your greatest concern, lean more toward “finding the thread” and “stopping indiscriminate filling.”

Week One: Become a Little Steadier

On day 1, write down the level at which your main difficulty currently lies. On day 2, restore one fixed point in your life. On day 3, write one honest sentence. On day 4, interrupt one automatic response. On day 5, write down three things you “cannot treat casually.” On day 6, find a reason for today. On day 7, look back over the week. This week, aim simply to do something, not to make it look good.

Week Two: Reconnect with Life a Little

Eat one meal with care; say something relatively honest to someone; set aside a stretch of time that is not flooded with input; ask whether what you have been missing most lately is basic support, warmth, or direction; do one small thing that “keeps you from betraying yourself further.” This week, begin to seek steadiness, allowing a little warmth and rhythm to recur.

Week Three: See the Thread a Little More Clearly

Write about three experiences of “I cannot do this.” Write about three moments of “Yes, this is it.” Put together what you wrote over the previous two days and look for a recurring thread. Ask what it is that you are most unwilling to surrender. This week, do not seek a complete answer. Seek only to notice the thread that keeps appearing.

Week Four: Let It Gradually Take Root

Identify one structure that has been continually draining you, set a small boundary around its influence, have a relatively honest conversation with someone, and write down a recent moment when you were less scattered and another when you betrayed yourself less. Finally, leave yourself just one action to continue into the next month. This week is not about increasing the demands. It is about allowing the earlier actions to begin becoming part of your life.

Appendix 2

Self-checks and writing pages

You do not need to complete this section all at once. Start with whichever questions resonate most. Your answers do not have to be complete. Even a single word or sentence is enough. Honesty matters more than polish.

A Quick Check of Your Current State

Check the statements that sound most like you.

- Survival: “What I fear most is that my life will suddenly collapse.” “I tense up when I think about money, work, or responsibilities.”
- Happiness: “It is not that I cannot go on living, but there is less and less warmth in my life.” “I have not truly relaxed in a long time.”
- Meaning: “I find it increasingly difficult to explain why I keep going.” “It is not that I have no goals, but that my goals feel less and less like my own.”

Eight Writing Questions

- What kind of treatment am I least willing to accept?
- What could I lose that would make me feel as though I had also lost a piece of myself?
- What am I still unwilling to let go of, even though it clearly does not pay off?
- If I keep living this way, what kind of person am I most afraid of becoming?
- In what moments do I feel more like myself, even though I am tired?
- If everything became more convenient, what would I least want to lose?
- What is the one line I most want to hold right now?
- If today were the last day of my life, what would I regret not having done?

For example, for “What kind of treatment am I least willing to accept?” you might think about being dismissed, being treated without care, being used, or being reduced to a function. For “If I keep living this way, what kind of person am I most afraid of becoming?” you might think about becoming increasingly numb, increasingly careless, or increasingly unlike yourself. For “What am I still unwilling to let go of, even though it clearly does not pay off?” you might think about taking things seriously, sincerity, a particular relationship, or a boundary you will not cross.

Weekly Reflection Page

Where was I most easily scattered this week? In what moment was I a little steadier than before? Where did I feel a little more like myself? What is still worth continuing to protect?

Appendix 3

A shared-reading outline

This section is suitable for book clubs, small-group discussions, partners reading together, and friends reading together. There is only one principle: speak less in lofty generalities and more about your own life.

Suggested Session Format: 35–45 Minutes

Begin with 5 minutes of quiet writing. Then take turns speaking for 10–15 minutes, without judging or interrupting. Spend another 10–15 minutes responding to one another, offering fewer explanations and more of “what I heard.” Leave 5 minutes at the end for each person to answer in one sentence: “What is one small thing I most want to protect next?”

Round One: Begin with Feelings

Which sentence in this handbook comes closest to your recent state? Lately, have you more often felt tired, empty, anxious, or unable to say? Does your main difficulty right now seem closer to survival, happiness, or meaning?

Round Two: Enter Through Experience

Where have you been most easily scattered lately? What have you been missing most: basic support, warmth, or direction? Was there a moment when you were very tired but felt more like yourself? A follow-up question could be: what usually triggers this point of unraveling?

Round Three: Go a Little Deeper

What in your life are you most unwilling to surrender? What kind of person are you most afraid of eventually becoming? Is there a way of life that looks good from the outside but that you know is not right for you?

Round Four: Talk About Structures, Not Only Yourself

Does your work environment hold you up or wear you down? Does your relational environment support you or make you more tense? Does your digital environment help your judgment or continually pull you apart?

Round Five: One Final Sentence from Each Person

What is one small thing I most want to protect next? Do not choose something grand. Choose something real. Writing it down matters more than expressing it perfectly in the moment.

Appendix 4

Starting points for readers in different states

The same starting point does not suit everyone. Begin where you are now.

For Those Who Are Very Tired

If you are very tired right now, do not rush to question the meaning of life. Begin with three things: recover one fixed point; do one fewer thing that keeps pulling you apart; and leave some time today that is not completely occupied by tasks. What you need most right now may be not an answer, but the restoration of a little basic rhythm and physical energy. Do not force yourself to understand everything first, and do not try to restart your entire life at once.

For Those Who Feel Very Empty

If you feel very empty right now, do not rush to fill the space with big goals. Begin with three things: write one honest sentence; find someone with whom you are willing to be a little more real; and recall three moments of “I cannot do this” and three of “Yes, this is it.” What you need most right now is not a louder slogan, but to feel your way back to that truer thread. Do not rush to fill the emptiness with grand goals, a whirl of activity, or intense stimulation.

For Those Who Feel Very Anxious

If you feel very anxious right now, do not rush to restart your whole life. Begin with three things: distinguish the level at which your greatest anxiety lies; interrupt one automatic response; and do the smallest genuine thing you can. What you need most right now is not to understand everything immediately, but first to stop anxiety from taking over every action. Do not make major decisions when you are most unsettled.

For Those Who Have Begun to See a Little More Clearly

If you have begun to see something of your own thread, do not rush to announce a dramatic change. Begin with three things: protect one fixed point; preserve one authentic relationship; and look back once a week. What you need most right now is not greater intensity, but greater steadiness. Do not rush to announce a huge change. First, let the little you have begun to see slowly find solid ground.

In Closing

The human heart is not a passing emotion, nor merely the ebb and flow of thoughts. It is more like the place that, when you grow quiet late at night, knows what you cannot let go of, what should not be surrendered, and what cannot be judged only by convenience. It is there that a deeper direction is first felt, before entering life and practical reality step by step.

Supplement: A Minimal Daily Log

Keeping a record is not about giving yourself a score. It simply helps you see that you have not been entirely without change.

Date	Today's Small Action	How It Felt, in One Sentence
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Not Understanding Everything All at Once

But Gradually Learning to Stop Losing Yourself

Often, people are not without a path. They have simply been living in a scattered state for too long.

This handbook cannot live your life for you, nor answer every question for you. It only hopes to accompany you in one thing: when you are tired, empty, and anxious; when it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why you keep going; when it feels as though you are merely being maintained in existence, do not rush to overturn your entire self.

First, distinguish what is happening. First, pause. First, recover a little rhythm, relationship, judgment, and the thread you are unwilling to surrender. A little is enough.

Many truly deep changes begin not with “I finally understand everything completely,” but with “I have finally stopped continuing to lose myself.”

Back-Cover Copy (For Publication)

When so many people are still going on with their lives, yet feel increasingly empty, increasingly anxious, and increasingly unable to explain why they should keep moving forward, what is truly missing is often not more lofty advice. It is a way to begin gathering themselves back, little by little, from disconnection, confusion, emptiness, and anxiety.

A Leap in Thought: Practical Handbook is not a book that demands you understand everything immediately. It is more like a handbook to keep beside you and open whenever you feel yourself slipping: helping you first distinguish whether you are facing a problem of survival, happiness, or meaning, and helping you recover rhythms, relationships, judgment, and the things you are unwilling to surrender.

This handbook does not aspire to grandeur or demand perfection. It accompanies you in something more important: moving from chaos to a little more solid ground, from being pushed along by life to slowly understanding why you keep going.

It is not a book of answers. It is a book that can still gently bring you back a little when emptiness returns.

Stop letting yourself get lost.

Where to Go from Here

The links below follow the natural sequence of questions raised by this text, without repeating the account of the wider framework already provided in the main body. All point to the current stable document pages at www.civitas.top.

This Document on the Website

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p08-thought-002/>

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p08-thought-002/>

01 — Emergent Meaning Cosmology: A Leap in Thought

Approaches questions of civilization through cognition, lived experience, and practical action, with the practical handbook helping readers carry them into individual life.

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p08-thought-001/>

02 — Emergent Meaning Cosmology: Academic Edition

Offers a philosophical account of the generation of meaning as part of deeper theoretical research, without being a prerequisite for the validity of the main public narrative.

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p08-cosmo-002/>

03 — Emergent Meaning Cosmology: Validation and Applications

Offers a philosophical account of the generation of meaning as part of deeper theoretical research, without being a prerequisite for the validity of the main public narrative.

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p08-cosmo-003/>

Complete Public Library

<https://www.civitas.top/en/library/>

Main Starting Point for Public Readers

<https://www.civitas.top/en/documents/p01-entry-006/>

Author: Zijun Fu | Produced by: Civilization Leap Research Group | Official public domain: www.civitas.top