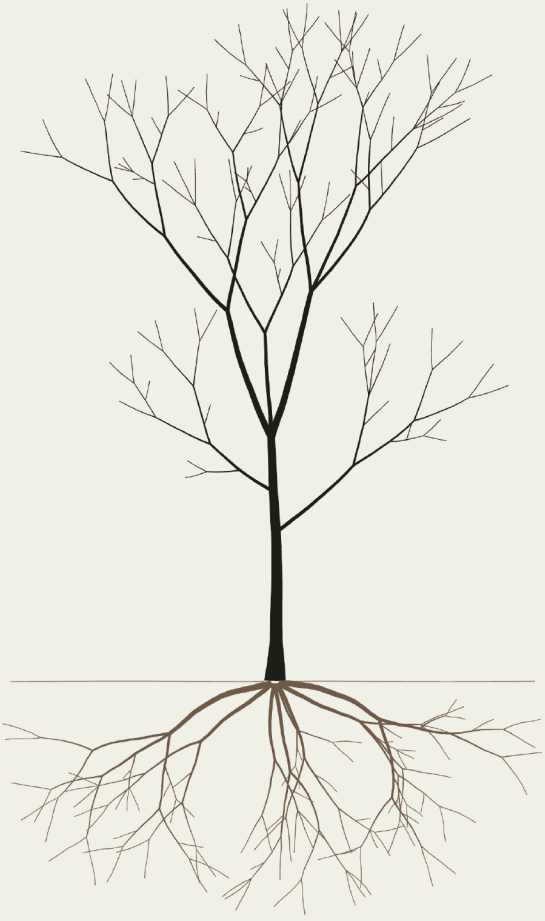
The Life Beneath the Lives



Anahita Emami

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The Life Beneath the Lives · Free sample: A Note Before We Begin, Introduction and Chapter 1
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A Note Before We Begin

I moved from a country where my options felt limited to one where almost anything I chose suddenly seemed possible. That move sped everything in this book up for me. I felt its questions many times over, and all at once.

It was hard. It also helped me see what was happening underneath.

I wrote it down in case it helps someone else. You may feel a smaller version of this, or a much stronger one. I can’t promise it will help everyone. It helped me.

Introduction

The question underneath all of it was embarrassingly simple.

Who am I?

I did not mean it in the abstract, philosophical sense. I meant it very literally.

Who am I if I care deeply about medicine and still feel pulled toward creating things of my own?

Who am I if I want beauty, achievement, money and freedom, but can also feel completely content by a pool with nowhere to be?

Who am I if several versions of my life feel possible at the same time?

For a while, I could not tell whether I had too many interests, too little discipline, too much ambition, not enough courage to choose, or some uncomfortable mix of all of them.

From the outside, my life looked full. I had spent years developing a serious career, and I cared about doing it well. I also cared about travel, beauty, friendship, learning, solving problems, creating things, and experiences that had nothing to do with being useful or impressive.

The problem was not that I wanted nothing. It was that I wanted many things, and several of them felt real.

I kept assuming there had to be one cleaner answer underneath. Maybe the doctor was the real me and everything else was a distraction. Maybe the entrepreneur was the real me, and medicine had simply taken too long to leave. Maybe I was an underdeveloped artist, ready to come out and finally take over my body and the world. Maybe I wanted freedom more than achievement. Maybe I was calling novelty curiosity. Maybe ambition was insecurity, dressed well. Maybe rest was escape. Maybe all of it was true, in different amounts.

The harder I tried to answer Who am I?, the more every choice turned into evidence. I was not only choosing what to do. I was trying to work out who I was from what I chose. That became exhausting.

Eventually I began to suspect that I had not failed to find the right answer. I was asking the question the wrong way.

That was when the tree appeared. Not as a grand theory. More as a relief.

A tree can grow branches that look nothing alike without any one of them being fake. One branch can grow enormous and still not be the whole tree. Another can stay small. Another can go dormant. Another can die. None of that, on its own, tells you what the whole tree is.

So this is the image the book uses.

Branches are the visible forms of a life: a career, travel, a business, a way of dressing, a project. They are what we grow, and growing them takes energy from the trunk. Every branch sends invoices.

The trunk is the structure that holds your values and the patterns that keep coming back. It feeds the branches and gives them their shape. Beauty, for example, can live in the trunk. It might grow into looking and feeling beautiful, into creating something beautiful, or into appreciating something beautiful. One value, many branches.

Roots are what nourish the trunk: a support system, sleep, exercise, healthy habits, and things like art done to calm the mind rather than to produce something.

Light is whatever a branch needs during a given season: time, attention, energy, money. No tree can give every branch full light at once.

For the first time, I could separate the visible forms of my life from what was feeding them. Medicine could be real without being all of me. Creation could be real without requiring me to become a founder

tomorrow. Travel could matter without happening in every season. Beauty could change form without disappearing. A branch could matter enormously without becoming the answer to Who am I?

That distinction became this book.

I needed the tree for a very modern problem: we now see more possible lives than any one person could realistically live.

This book is for anyone with many interests that sometimes conflict, or that ask for more time and capacity than one life has.

It will not answer Who am I? once and for all. I am suspicious of any answer that neat. It is about learning to recognize what keeps returning beneath the different forms your life takes: what is genuinely yours, what is only bright, what keeps you nourished, what deserves this season, what can wait, and what can change without making you disappear with it.

I want to be clear about one thing. This is not a book against ambition, hard work or having many goals. It is not asking you to want less, do less, or pick one thing and drop the rest.

While writing it, I was also preparing for an exam, creating a product and working on creative projects. My life did not get smaller. What changed was underneath it. The ideas in this book helped me keep who I am steady, even while what my life looks like keeps changing.

Maybe the goal is not to find one identity strong enough to hold your whole life. Maybe it is to become familiar enough with your trunk that you no longer need every branch to tell you who you are.

I am still learning how to answer some of these questions. That is probably the right place to begin.

Branches That Wanted to Be the Whole Tree

There are four weekends in a month. One or two could disappear to on-call shifts. With what remained, I wanted to learn a language, vibe code an app, travel, learn horseback riding, figure out Amazon FBA, dropshipping and selling courses, because they were all over social media, learn tennis, become extremely fit, look good at all times, keep up my friendships, and still somehow be excellent at medicine.

I was constantly running after the next shiny thing while feeling guilty that the previous shiny thing had not advanced enough. Whenever I focused on one branch, I watched my output fall everywhere else.

Looking back, every item on that list was a branch. I did not see them that way then. To me, each one was a question about who I was, and each one wanted to be the whole tree.

The biggest branch was medicine. It had already taken more than a decade of my life: exams, moves, night shifts, years of developing a very particular set of skills. There were patients who trusted me with things they had never told anyone else, and the strange satisfaction of finally knowing what to do when something was going wrong. Medicine had shaped my schedule, friendships, confidence, geography, and even the way I listened to people.

It was a big branch, and it took a lot of energy. I was no longer sure it still fit the tree. But it was not a hobby I could casually outgrow, and I could not just ignore it.

And still, other branches kept starting. I could hear about someone starting a company and immediately feel something wake up. I would hear about a product solving an annoying problem and start thinking about a better version before I had finished hearing how the first one worked. I could be lying on a floatie in a pool, feeling the sun and the

absence of obligation and thinking, this is life, and later that same day become genuinely excited about how to solve something as big as world poverty.

I loved beautiful clothes and beautiful rooms. I wanted to travel. Like any adult, I had branches growing to make money, and I wanted a lot of it. I wanted creation and scale. I liked solving problems. I also wanted stretches of life in which nobody needed anything from me.

None of this felt fake. That was the problem.

If a desire had obviously been borrowed from somebody else, I could have let it go and felt I had found the real me. A few were like that. Research is not a path I want, so when I watched a colleague present at a major conference and pictured myself up there, I knew that picture was borrowed. Remembering what it would take to get there was enough to let it go. Others were not so easy. When I watched someone recognized early in their career as a leader in their field, that picture held many of the things I am actually reaching for. Most of my desires were like the second one. They seemed real, all of them wanted time, and some contradicted each other.

It did not help that I am a dreamer. I did not want to try each branch. I wanted to be excellent in all of them. I rarely imagined the modest version of anything. I pictured the highest point each branch could reach, then compared my present life with all of those endpoints at once.

And they were not fantasies. I could usually see how I might get there, make that thing, learn that skill, or live that life. That made them harder to dismiss.

So I asked my branches a question they could not answer: which one of you is the real me? Was I someone who wanted an extraordinary life but secretly needed a quiet one? Was I ambitious because I loved creating, or because I was afraid an ordinary life would make me

ordinary? I treated identity like a multiple-choice question with one correct answer.

I believed I had to choose. And if I could not choose, the alternative was worse. I had watched my output fall every time I switched branches. Was I simply someone who could not finish anything? Did I have no trajectory? Would I end up a nobody with too many interests and very little real output?

That made ordinary prioritization feel much heavier than it was. If medicine received most of a year, was I abandoning the person who wanted to travel? If I saved rather than spent, was I becoming someone who did not appreciate luxury? If I let an idea sit in a note instead of acting on it, was I proving I was not really a creator?

The arithmetic was obvious: one person cannot give full light to every branch at once. What confused me was the meaning I attached to the arithmetic.

At its worst, all that movement produced the opposite of movement. There were months when I could sit in the same chair on my balcony and feel as if I were grieving lives I had not even lived. I was afraid to choose, because choosing one branch seemed to cut off all the others.

In trying not to lose any possible life, I was losing time from the one life that was actually happening.

This is where the sample ends.

The rest of the book goes underneath the branches: the trunk, the roots that feed it, and how to choose what gets light in each season.

The full book is at **thelifebeneathlives.com**