

# GENTLE

A Revolution in How We Think,  
Lead, and Succeed Using the  
Finnish Art of **Sisu**

# POWER

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 **sounds true**  
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# Preface:

## An Invitation to Gentle Power

Love is our base element of life, and love has always been there waiting for us to remove the veils that conceal it. Power is our base element too, and together with love, it lays the blueprint for how we express our energy and potential in life. I call their harmonious expression *gentle power*.

This book is the result of my lifelong struggle to learn about love and power through trial and error. It comes out of my quest to discover how to show up for myself and others from a place of kindness while not disowning my boundaries and self-worth. This pursuit to become more resolute yet loving—and more loving yet resolute—has brought me to the edge of my capacity, curiosity, and courage more times than I can count.

The truth is, I'm still learning. And often it feels like I'm failing as much as I succeed. But I've noticed that when I change my perspective to focus less on *achievement* and more on *learning*, something shifts in the narrative. In that new paradigm, every failure I meet—just like any ecstatic moment of reckoning—reveals itself as a lesson in love and power.

My quest has taken me on a run across an entire country in search of both my shadowy pain points and the parts of me where the light already shines. It has also transported me to faraway lands to gain perspective through the ancient wisdom of martial arts in a remote mountain temple. My quest has called me to overcome my crippling fear of public embarrassment by stepping onto the global stage as a speaker, and it has found me shattered into pieces by what I mistakenly thought was love. My quest has seen me transcend the trauma of interpersonal violence and has witnessed me gain the courage to love and trust again.

Over time, I've learned to take full responsibility for creating the future I want to manifest by standing behind my vision to discover my sovereignty as the protagonist of my own story. All my so-called failures have led to this. Instead of following someone else's drumbeat, I've learned to

transcend the naïve uninitiated psyche of my youth that confused entanglements for authentic relationships, that mistook self-importance for self-worth. Ultimately, my quest sent me on whatever path it took to discover the union of hard and soft within myself. From that space of gentle power, I was finally able to begin building a true and honest union with others.

At its core, this book is about discovering and managing love and power. As a fundamental ingredient in our lives, power is exchanged in every conversation we have, in every traffic encounter, and in every message we share. Every behavior, gesture, thought, and word has the ability to *empower* or *disempower*. Like love, power is not an abstraction, but more of an active verb. How we express that verb is our contribution to the world. It's our legacy lived in the here and now, and it ultimately requires us to step more fully into our maturity.

For a long time, I was a passionate human rights activist who put immense effort into convincing everyone about the importance and urgency of compassion, personal responsibility, and justice. I actively shared my ideas and advice on social media, and I facilitated women's empowerment circles to contribute to community building. My concern for humanity kept me going in the day, but it also kept me up at night. I was so consumed by the injustice and suffering I witnessed in the world that my partner at the time proposed I take a break—just one day a week (Friday) when I didn't doomscroll or ask people to sign petitions or post on Facebook. My instructions were simply to enjoy being alive. He called it *No Rant Friday*. In truth, I think *No Rant Friday* was more for him than me. No matter how beautiful the intention, it can get heavy to spend time with people who always carry the world on their shoulders. As I'll demonstrate later, the weight we take on in life has everything to do with our boundaries, our relationship to power, and even our experience of love.

Our deepest strengths have everything to do  
with gentleness toward ourselves and others.

In recent years—along with my newly discovered gentleness toward myself and others—I’ve learned to let go of my need to be right and constantly work to make the world a better place. I’ve also learned to let go of thinking of myself as a teacher or an expert *per se*. From where I stand, the best I can do is keep working on myself and encouraging others. In the daily ebb and flow of contraction and expansion, I trust that I’m continuing to learn, grow, and heal those parts in me that stand in the way of my ability to love and care for others. Throughout everything, I’m writing it down and sharing the stories. This book is one of those stories.

The run I mentioned a few paragraphs back was a fifteen-hundred-mile solo jaunt across New Zealand. My initial goal was to complete the trip in fifty days—completing more than a marathon each day with my trusted one-person crew taking care of my practical needs, such as food and so on. Needless to say, it was an extremely intimate, isolated experience that tested the boundaries of my physical and mental fabric and required around two years of preparation. The run was also the fieldwork portion of my doctorate thesis on *sisu*, which was then a somewhat lesser-known Finnish concept related to perseverance, inner fortitude, and the boundless human spirit. What I learned during those excruciating hours on the road by myself was life-altering. It now acts as the foundation for my personal life as well as my research into human behavior and consciousness. For centuries, *sisu* has been thought of as some superhuman resolve for never giving up. Surprisingly, my run across New Zealand taught me way more about surrender and suppleness than strict resolve and rigor. In fact, I learned that our deepest strengths may often have more to do with gentleness toward ourselves and others.

My run was also an opportunity to launch Sisu Not Silence, a movement that seeks to dismantle the shame that (unjustly so) tends to accompany the experience of interpersonal violence—be the abuse emotional, physical, or sexual—and celebrates the strength of the millions who’ve overcome these atrocities. As a social scientist and overcomer myself, I noticed that people who suffer from domestic violence are often deemed weak, damaged, or even responsible for their trauma, which has everything to do with how people struggle to speak about these experiences. That’s why together with several volunteers I organized the global Sisu Not Silence campaign. The campaign also included the journey

across New Zealand with fifteen in-person events along my route to help inspire the creation of compassionate cultures with zero tolerance for abuse of any kind.

Sisu has many expressions, and some are even destructive. In its gentle-power form, sisu is ultimately a victory of pliability over pain or discernment over sheer determination. As much as I trained my body for the run, I had to train my mind to overcome certain deeply ingrained beliefs I harbored—beliefs like “progress requires pain,” “there’s inherent glory in suffering,” and “achievement is all about mind over matter.” In contrast, it was only through gentle power (or *warm sisu*, as I sometimes call it) that I was able to do what I did in New Zealand while still honoring myself, even under extreme pressure. I learned that accomplishing a goal at all costs wasn’t for me, and the whole *mind over matter* mentality wasn’t something I wanted to promote as a leader. Instead, I wanted to help others see that there is another way: *to align mind with matter*.

Life itself is the ultimate ultramarathon. The journey is varied and long, and it offers us countless chances to know ourselves, ease into our own true pace, and find confidence in the innate wisdom of our mind and body to carry us from rough terrain into the lush pastures of harmony. The questions I ended up asking myself during the run (for example, *What example am I setting through my decisions and the way I carry myself? How can I honor myself and others throughout this run? To what extent am I guided by mental autopilot based on old habits versus discerning the best course of action fresh in the moment?*) ultimately freed me from the tyranny of performance and obligation at the cost of presence. It was through contemplating these questions that I transcended my need to always try so hard (no matter what) and be right (no matter what). It felt as if I had found a portal into some lesser-explored fibers of my being—namely, the parts of me that inherently valued understanding over accomplishment, harmony over endless self-proving, and integrity over accolades.

Personal leadership is the most important gift we can give ourselves. It’s also our most significant gift to the world because the ripples of our actions are more apparent and immediate in this era of a global digital community. On one hand, demeaning messages in online forums have had a hand in several tragic teenage suicides; on the other, people

have leveraged social media to incite positive actions, like the Ice Bucket Challenge that helped the ALS Association raise over \$115 million for research and elevated awareness of the disease. None of these outcomes just “happen.” Behind them are people making choices based on their estimation of the value of human life, which means that both power and gentleness, as well as leadership, are core ingredients here. For better or worse, they all have an impact to the system.

The need for leadership and leadership development has never been more urgent than in today’s uncertain, quickly evolving, and super-connected world. In part, this book is a call to redefine leadership not only in terms of titles and positions, but as a role in life as well as an ongoing responsibility. Shifting our leadership paradigm might sound like an overwhelming task, but we haven’t arrived at the doorstep of this new era unprepared. We come fortified with the wisdom of cultures past and present, the hard-won lessons of other curious pilgrims of life, and the incomparable gifts of our own experience. Accordingly, this book is more descriptive than prescriptive. I want to offer the perspectives and practices that have worked for me, all while encouraging you to primarily reflect on your personal wisdom and experience to foster your own relationship with gentle power.

As Martin Luther King Jr. stated in 1967, “What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.”<sup>1</sup> It’s my wish that this book encourages that realization and that it helps you understand the fundamental role of power in all human interactions. I also hope that it assists you in uncovering the potential for gentleness that resides within you.

Whether we’re facing external peaks or internal valleys, our most inspiring qualities as humans are our courage and endurance to keep moving forward. This tendency of ours transforms former barriers into future frontiers, and things we once feared dissolve like the sublime dreamscape that fades with the sunrise. This is how we became what I sometimes like to call *Homo overcomus*. This is what *sisu* is all about—the eternal spark inside us that refuses to let us disappear. Gentle power takes it even further. It’s the power of nurture and care for all living beings that turns that spark into something graceful, caring, patient, and sustaining.



## PREFACE: AN INVITATION TO GENTLE POWER

I'm convinced that gentle power is the shift that's going to make the difference. Over the past decade or so, a tidal wave of research and literature on the benefits of compassionate leadership, communication soft skills, and psychological safety in teams and communities has been swelling, and it's about to hit the shore of our collective consciousness with undeniable power. I predict that one day we'll look back on the abundant examples of inflated egos and poor leadership in the public sphere (and all over social media) and cringe in utter disbelief at what we tolerated—and even glorified—for far too long.

This book is an invitation to learn from our collective journey as leaders. It's full of my stories but also those of various researchers, parents, entrepreneurs, teachers, friends, family members, and leaders of all types, whose wisdom and experience form part of the core foundation of this book. I hope you'll join us. Through your engaged involvement, this book becomes your story too.

# Introduction

It was my thirty-eighth birthday, and I was sitting on a wooden deck of a cottage in the Los Padres National Forest in California. Everything was still. The night sky was clear of clouds and dotted with a curious glow of stars peering at me from light-years away. The moment was abundant with a kind of storyless presence that stimulated my senses with soft alertness. Suddenly, the air around me turned dense, and I sensed an anticipation in the treetops towering above me like giants against the black November sky. It was as if something ancient had been making its way toward me for a long time and was now about to make its grand entrance. Then, a gust of wind brushed powerfully over the circle of redwoods around me and made everything above the ground sway. The moment of stillness had birthed itself into motion in a single breath, maturing into an observable power that made everything it touched shift, respond, and reorganize to adapt to its majestic emergence.

Before that moment, there had been a motion of a different kind—that of gentle awakening potential. I could feel it in the union of roots and wind. It was a nonchalant presence of a power so free from ambition and force that it didn't need to impose or coerce, nor did it need to apologize for its presence. Nature once more had shown me how gracefully the supple and substantial, tender and tough, and formidable and fragile can coexist, how they dance and blend in the most unsuspecting moments of our everyday existence. It also reminded me how good it feels to witness this kind of harmony and how much we need an awakening into such an existence.

Our world currently is creaking dangerously beneath the weight of past mistakes made in leadership (and followership, for that matter). We're facing a perfect storm of overlapping crises in public health, global markets, income disparity, the environment, family relationships, as well as

displacement of entire populations and global conflict—at worst, escalating to wars. Our leaders have created systems that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a small group of people while most of the world is kept in such emotional and economic distress that it leaves them little chance for anything more than basic survival.

It doesn't have to be this way. Human thought—when used without fear and for the benefit of all—is a thing of magic, and our planet holds the resources to sustain global well-being and create genius solutions beyond our wildest dreams. But it can only happen if we are organized around a common vision of unity. The tiniest unit of unity is the inner shift from *me* to *we*, and it means to optimize our leadership to empower each other in our everyday actions as well as on a grander scale. To empower means to support someone to have confidence in themselves and access to the resources (mental or material) they need to stand in their sovereignty. And we do this while knowing that when the people we empower discover a deeper experience of their strength and purpose, they may want things that no longer align with our preferred plan of action. This means giving our children full autonomy to choose their career path and support their choices of partners, or it might mean letting go, gracefully and kindly, of an intimate partner who wishes to part ways with us. At the heart of *true* leadership—even when its function is to guide and direct—always ultimately lies the intention for freedom and autonomy for the people we engage with.

The shadow of people wanting *to be leaders* without actually doing what's needed *to lead* has caught up with us. At the same time, the potential for something new—a kind of collective consciousness that values true leadership—has never felt so palpable. Individuals across the planet are becoming increasingly curious about disciplines that value presence, slowing down, self-inquiry, and interconnectedness. Practices that a couple of decades ago would have been unheard of outside of a few in-groups are now common (mindfulness and yoga among them) and included in the workplaces of some of the most influential companies in the world. Although the pace of this type of change might feel slow and unnoticeable in the larger picture, I believe it hints at the coming age—an age in which we leave behind outdated ways of relating to each other and step into a new realm of leadership and collaboration.

This book outlines a universal vision and strategy applicable to all domains of human interaction. I've spent the last years researching what I've termed gentle power—a kind of integrity-fueled fortitude that cultivates balance in both our strong and soft sides—and I propose that gentle power will restore balance in our world that has come to value competition over connection and profit over purpose and presence. No wonder so many of us feel lost and struggle to align with our potential when the message we mostly hear is that of constant performance at the expense of our humanness. Gentle power invites us to land into our heart as we power on.



The Finnish concept of *sisu* also plays a major role in this book. *Sisu* doesn't have a close synonym in any language, but the term denotes a kind of extraordinary inner strength in the face of adversity and is about not giving up, no matter what you're up against. Rooting back hundreds of years, *sisu* has been a well-kept secret—a way of life and philosophy that has impacted generations of Finns. It's not that we intended to keep it to ourselves. It's just that *sisu* is like the air we breathe or the way one has learned to tie their shoelaces—most of the time we don't even think of it, and so we don't talk about it. Although many Finns would be eager to describe *sisu* through their personal stories, for most of the word's history, *sisu* has been elusive and poorly understood. It's a unique construct that's easier to give examples of than define. *Sisu* is most often illustrated when we face the slimmest of odds and must reach beyond our known capacities. We arrive at the edge of our preconceived mental or physical limits to find, almost by magic, a previously unexpressed reserve of energy that carries us forward to the next moment. If you've endured significant adversity, reached for a goal far greater than your assumed capacities, or pushed through ominous challenges you had no idea how you'd complete, you've experienced *sisu*.

Sisu as a term made its grand appearance on the global stage during WWII when the comparably tinier Finnish military, against all possible odds, resisted the mammoth-sized invading Soviet Army. In Finland, the battle, fought over the course of 108 days amidst the harshest winter recorded at that time, is still referred to as the “Miracle of Winter War.” The *New York Times* headline from January 14, 1940 read: “Sisu: A Word That Explains Finland,”<sup>1</sup> but afterward, sisu returned to obscurity other than among Finns and aficionados of long-distance running, who knew all about the epic history of Finnish endurance running.

While being a culture or a way life, at the same time sisu is deeply personal and is known as that which will enable the individual to cut “even through a stone wall.”<sup>2</sup> Whether a literal stone barrier or one of the many proverbial walls of fear, shame, or doubt, we all share an inner beauty and power that enables us to break through, keep moving forward no matter what, voice our truths despite our fear of repercussions, and take big chances against small odds.

Even though I’m Finnish by birth, my path to researching sisu as a psychological construct has felt accidental. My work has its origin in a personal journey through violent trauma that occurred about twelve years ago. I had just moved to New York City with my then boyfriend of six months. Soon after, the relationship took a tragic turn into deepening emotional control and manipulation and, ultimately, physical violence. In the end, my former partner was convicted and deported from the United States. The warning signs had been there all along: the gaslighting, his planting seeds of doubt regarding my personal and professional competence, the sometimes-dizzying emotional intensity, and his push to move our relationship forward quickly. He was playing to my codependency and lack of self-worth at the time (I don’t think I even knew the terms codependency and self-worth back then), and I hadn’t yet learned how to say *no* when it’s the only sane thing to do. He also took advantage of my undying faith in the goodness of all people. When it came to gentle power, I certainly erred on the soft end of the continuum—I truly believed it was my ill-fated duty to nurse him into healing and emotional wholeness.

Finding my way out of that abusive trance, I recounted the decisions that led me to such a relationship in the first place. In the process, I started wondering about personal power and self-leadership and their