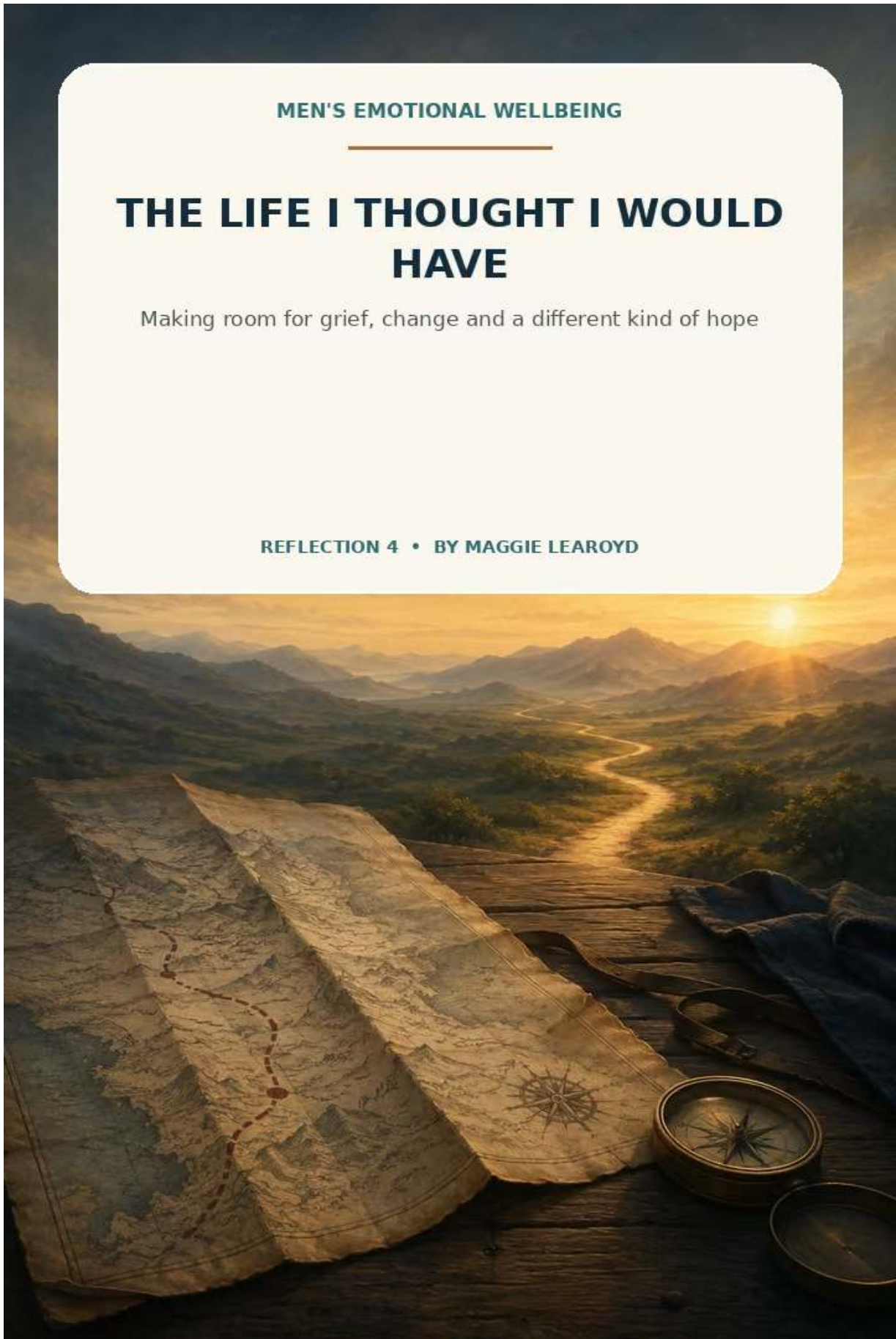


MEN'S EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

THE LIFE I THOUGHT I WOULD HAVE

Making room for grief, change and a different kind of hope

REFLECTION 4 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



The Life I Thought I Would Have

Making room for grief, change and a different kind of hope

"Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." — Søren Kierkegaard

Most of us carry two lives.

There is the life we are living, and there is the life we once imagined we would live.

When we are young, the future often appears remarkably clear. We imagine the work we will do, the relationships we hope to build, the family we may have, the places we might travel and the person we believe we are becoming. These expectations are rarely detailed plans. More often, they are quiet assumptions about how life will unfold. They provide direction, hope and a sense of continuity between the present and the future.

Life, however, has a habit of resisting certainty.

Careers take unexpected turns. Relationships begin and end. Health changes. Parents grow older. Children choose different paths from those we imagined. Opportunities appear that were never anticipated, while others quietly disappear without explanation. Sometimes these changes bring joy. Sometimes they bring disappointment. Often they bring both at the same time.

There is a form of grief that accompanies these moments, although it is not always recognised as grief. It is the grief of the unlived life. The sadness attached to possibilities that never became reality, to ambitions that gradually faded or to versions of ourselves that we quietly left behind as circumstances changed.

This experience is not unique to men, yet many men find it difficult to acknowledge because it can feel dangerously close to admitting failure. If identity has become closely connected to providing, succeeding or remaining dependable, then recognising disappointment may seem incompatible with the image of strength that has been carefully maintained over many years.

Yet disappointment is not failure.

It is part of being human.

There is wisdom in allowing ourselves to mourn not only the people we lose, but also the futures we imagined. Such grief does not diminish gratitude for the life we have. The two can exist together. It is entirely possible to love one's family while wondering about the career that never happened. To feel proud of the life that has been built while quietly missing the dreams that were set aside along the way.

Perhaps emotional wellbeing depends less upon pretending that these feelings do not exist and more upon making room for them with honesty and compassion. The stories we tell ourselves about success, achievement and purpose continue to evolve throughout our lives. There is no point at which that story is finished.

The challenge is not to recreate the future we once imagined, but to remain open to the possibility that meaning can still be found in the life that is unfolding now.

For some people, these reflections become easier when shared with another person. CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) offers confidential support through its helpline and webchat for anyone who is finding life difficult, feeling overwhelmed or struggling to make sense of what they are experiencing. Reaching out does not require a crisis. Sometimes it simply begins with a conversation.

Perhaps the life we imagined was never the only life capable of bringing fulfilment.

Perhaps the task is not to live without regret, but to remain open to hope.

Even when the road ahead looks different from the one we expected.

Further Reflection

There is no shame in grieving the life you imagined.

Sometimes acceptance is not about letting go of hope.

It is about discovering that hope can take a different shape.

If You'd Like to Continue the Conversation

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably) provides free, confidential support by phone and webchat for anyone who is struggling with life's challenges. Whether you are feeling overwhelmed, uncertain or simply need someone to listen without judgement, CALM offers a compassionate space to begin that conversation.