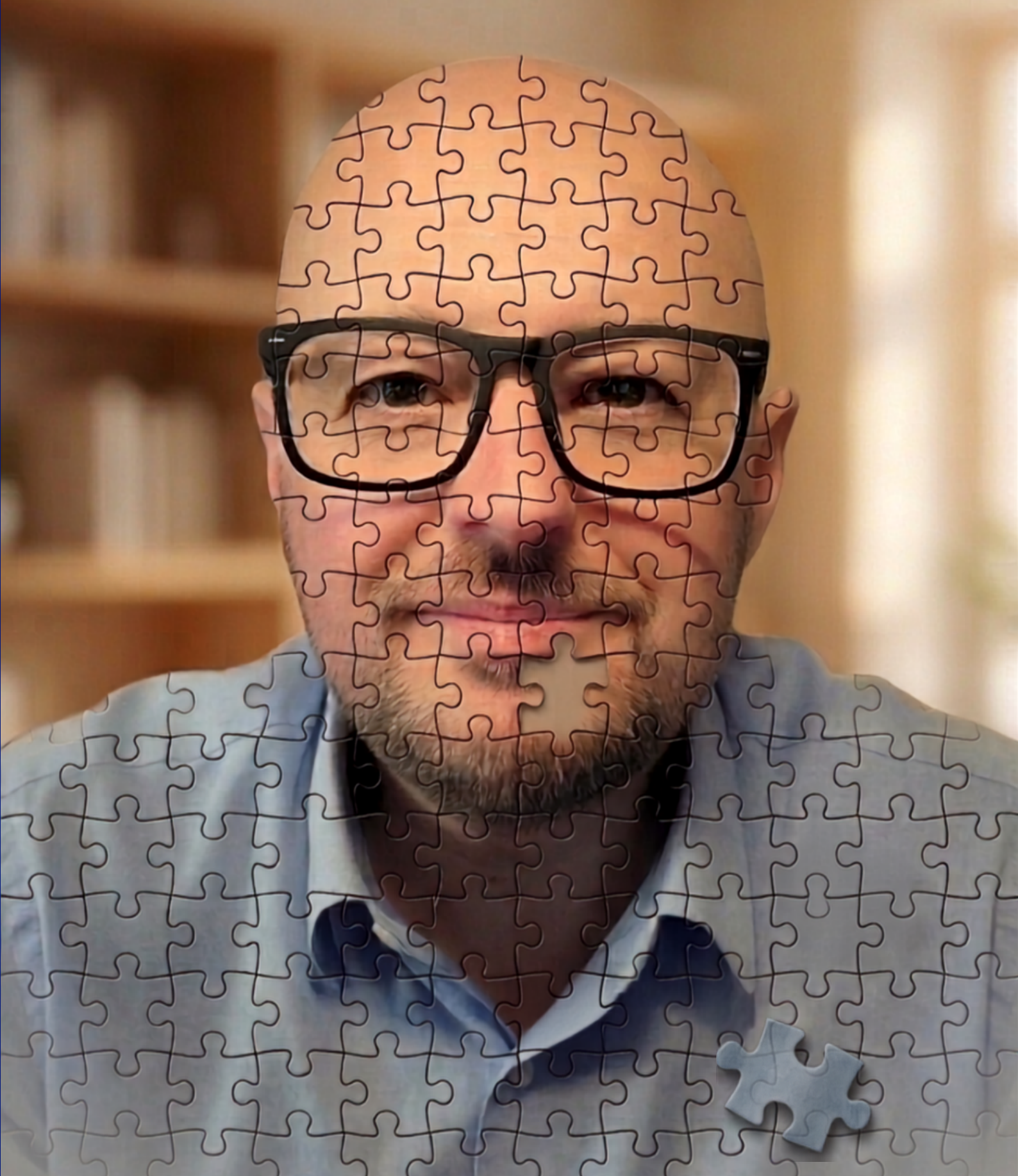




The Jigsaw of You

What are the pieces of your life?

Paul Walton

Foreword

Do not be worried about being lost. We can work it out.

This book is for men who feel like something is not right but cannot quite name what it is.

You do not need to be in crisis to read it. You do not need to have hit rock bottom or lost everything. You just need that quiet feeling that keeps showing up, the one that says this is not quite it, and I am not sure how I got here.

If that sounds familiar, keep reading.

This is a self-help book grounded in real stories from a real career and a real life. The stories you will read are a small selection from thirty five years of professional experience and a personal life that has been, to put it mildly, eventful. I have used them because I believe people learn more from honest experience than from theory. Every concept in this book is illustrated by something that actually happened.

Here is what you will find. My story, the honest version, including parts I have never put in writing before. A framework for understanding your values and your needs and what happens when they are not being met. And some practical questions that will help you start thinking more deliberately about what you actually want from your working life and your personal life.

It is not a long book. It is not a gentle book. And it does not have all the answers. What it has is honesty, which I have found is usually more useful than answers anyway.

Paul Walton

About the Author

Paul Walton started work at the age of nine, delivering fizzy soft drinks from the back of a lorry across Edinburgh, including some of the worst social housing estates in the city. He did that through to the age of seventeen, working Thursday and Friday nights and Saturday mornings. At twelve he also had a morning and evening paper round. He left school three months before his sixteenth birthday and went straight into an apprenticeship, servicing some of the roughest council housing in Scotland.

After a year he saw a job advertised at Ernst and Whinney, now Ernst and Young, paying six pounds a week more. He applied, got it, and became the office junior running around for some of the most senior partners in Scotland.

It was there, at around eighteen, chatting to junior accountants, that he first heard people talk about university. Paul did not know what university was. It had never come up at home, and it was never going to. His parents expected their children to leave school and start working, and they did.

That early working life taught him two things that have stayed with him ever since. What bad looks like and what good looks like. And the gap between the two is almost always about communication and ambition, not background or qualification.

Paul went on to build a 35-year career in IT Support, IT Business Relationships and IT Transformation, working for some of the largest and most recognised organisations in the world, including PricewaterhouseCoopers, Accenture, Ernst and Young and Xerox. At the core of all of it has been communication and change.

Today, he is the co-founder of PI Advisory and The Art of Speaking, a suite of communication programmes for professionals at every stage of their career. The Art of Speaking is a two day residential programme for IT leaders and senior stakeholders. The Confident Voice is a practical workshop for graduates entering the job market. The Board Brief is a structured consulting engagement for CIOs preparing high value board submissions. At the core of all three is the same belief. Communication is the gap between what you know and what lands.

He is a qualified Transformational Coach, accredited in 2018.

Paul moved from Edinburgh to London in 1999 and has lived in and around South West London and Surrey ever since. He is an armchair Scottish Rugby and Heart of Midlothian fan, and shares his home with two miniature schnauzers.

He has had a colourful life. That experience is what allows him to lean into three words in everything he does, professionally and personally: Direct, Experienced and Realistic. His values are authenticity and integrity.

The Other Road

Choose Your Future. Choose Life.

If you grew up in Scotland in the 1980s and you have seen Trainspotting, you will know it is not just a film. It is a document of real life. Danny Boyle captured something that was genuinely happening in Edinburgh at that time, in specific streets, in specific estates, to specific people. The heroin epidemic that tore through parts of that city was real and it was savage. Edinburgh at that time was known as the drug capital of Europe. It did not discriminate much between postcodes. I had a small but very direct window into that world.

In the mid to late eighties I was a part time delivery boy for Bon Accord, working a route on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. The full time delivery boy on that route was a lad called Woody. Woody was older than me. He knew the route, he knew the customers, and for a while he was just another person I worked alongside.

Then Woody got into heroin.

I remember one Friday night, I was about fourteen, Woody asked me to take a lemonade order to a house in Dalry, an area in the west of Edinburgh of Victorian tenements, working class and popular with first time buyers, not poor, not rich, just ordinary people getting on with their lives. When I got there, he said, ask to use the bathroom. While you are in there, use the hot water to clean out this needle.

I did it. I have no idea why, if I am honest. Probably because at some level I looked up to Woody. He was full of life, a great character. At fourteen you do not always stop to think about what you are actually holding in your hands when someone you admire asks you for a favour. Woody used to talk about parties. Not the kind I had been to. He invited me more than once.

It was something straight out of Trainspotting, the version of Edinburgh that the film showed the world, except this was not a film and these were not actors. I never went. I am not sure I can tell you exactly why, not a single clear reason. I just never went.

A few months after the night I cleaned that needle, Woody died of a heroin overdose.

I have never forgotten him.

Working on those delivery routes I also saw the housing estates that formed the backdrop to all of it. I have mentioned them elsewhere in this book, the boarded up council houses, the stairwells that stank, the floorboards ripped up for firewood, the genuine fear of running into someone who would rob you for the price of a fix. That was not television. That was Tuesday morning in parts of Edinburgh.

There is a poster from Trainspotting that I have had on my bedroom wall for years. The Choose Life monologue. It lists everything a conventional life offers. Career, family, television, washing machine, car, pension. From the perspective of the characters in that film, it is a list of traps, reasons to choose heroin instead. But read it as a man in his mid-30s who has drifted into all of those things without ever really choosing them and it hits differently. The list is not the problem. The list is fine. The problem is sleepwalking into it without ever asking yourself what you actually want, and then waking up one day wondering why it all feels like a sentence rather than a life.

Choose your future. Choose life.

That line means something different when you have stood in a bathroom in Dalry at fourteen holding a dead man's needle.

I was talking to a good friend not long ago. He mentioned that a mutual acquaintance, someone I see occasionally at get-togethers in Edinburgh, had said that he thought I considered myself better than everyone else.

My internal response was this. While he was playing with his Tonka truck, I was working in some of the worst housing estates in the UK. I know what bad looks like because I was close enough to touch it.

That is not arrogance. That is context.

My father in that yard, respected by people who knew what real work looked like. Woody on a Friday night in Dalry, going the other way. The estates in between, showing me every week what a life without direction could become. Those three things together are where my ambition came from. Not from thinking I was better than anyone. From knowing exactly what I was running towards and exactly what I was running from.

Most people only have one of those. I had both.

The Driveway

My partner called the police. She told me she had, and I was glad. She had been going crazy in the house and I was frightened for my daughter.

I picked my daughter up and carried her outside. We stood together at the end of the driveway. I do not know exactly what I thought I was doing. Getting her out of the house. Keeping her calm. Giving everyone space. My daughter was not troubled by any of it. She was a happy baby. She sat in my arms sucking on her dummy, completely unaware. Three police cars arrived. Blues and twos. In a quiet, affluent street in Surbiton that felt like an extraordinary amount of resource. I remember thinking that.

They spoke to her mother. I do not recall being asked much at all. The decision was made quickly and without real conversation from my side. A female police officer walked down the driveway towards me, took my daughter gently from my arms, and carried her back towards the house.

My daughter went without a fuss. Dummy in, content, no idea.

I watched them walk away down the drive. Then I was put in the back of a police car.

That was the last I saw of my daughter that day. It would be a very long time before anything felt normal again.

I was arrested for domestic violence. The accusation was a lie (my arrest was thrown out of court).

I had been in bed ill with sickness and diarrhoea when the argument started. Sweating through old clothes, barely able to stand. The kind of ill where you have not washed, have not eaten, and the last thing on your mind is what you look like. They took me away in those clothes.

That is what I was wearing in the back of that police car. That is what I was wearing in that cell in Sutton overnight. That is what I was standing in at the custody desk in Clapham the next afternoon.

I spent that night in a cell at Sutton Police Station. I want you to think about what a night in a cell does to a man who has spent his career in boardrooms, managing teams, sitting across the table from senior people in some of the largest organisations in the world. It does not matter how strong you think you are. You lie there in those clothes, on that mattress, and something happens to your sense of who you are.

The next morning they moved me to Clapham.

Early afternoon, I was standing at a custody desk. The sergeant told me they were prepared to bail me. As part of my bail I was not allowed to return home. I needed somewhere else to live until the court dates. He asked if I had anywhere to go, anyone I could call.

I thought of two friends from school. Both lived near my home in Surbiton. Both married, young kids, settled lives. Good men. They would have come. I know that now.

I said I had no one.

That was a lie. I simply did not want to inconvenience them. Did not want to drop my chaos into their lives. So I told the custody sergeant I had nobody, because asking for help felt like too much to ask.

He told me I would be remanded to Wandsworth Prison while the matter was investigated. They estimated ten weeks.

My legs stopped working. I collapsed into the custody desk. Two officers steadied me at the desk. That was one of the lowest and scariest points in my life.

Then something shifted. I asked to make a call. I rang one of those friends I had just told them I did not have. Got his voicemail. Left a message trying to sound calmer than I was. Then I stood there thinking, he is not there, this is it, I am going to Wandsworth tonight.

He phoned back. Offered immediately. The police agreed to release me.

Before I went to his house, walking down Clapham High Street in those dirty clothes, I stopped at Boots and bought wet wipes. Then I went to TK Maxx and bought a change of clothes. I washed myself as best I could in the changing rooms. My friend lives in a very affluent area. I was not going to turn up on his doorstep looking like what I had just been through.

That instinct, to clean yourself up, to look presentable, to arrive with some dignity intact even when everything has gone, that is either something you recognise immediately or it is not.

This book is about something not being right and what to do about it. It focuses on your career, your values, your needs. The above gives you a small insight into my life and the inspiration I have had in writing this book.

You do not need to have lived what I have lived for this book to be useful to you. I recognise that many people have chaotic lives and mine is just one version of that. But the drift I am describing, the going with the flow, the not asking what you actually want, the life that just happens to you rather than one you choose, that starts long before any of this.

It starts the moment you stop thinking deliberately about where you are going. One wrong move, one relationship not properly thought through, one job taken for the wrong reasons, and the direction of travel changes.

This book is about catching that before it catches you.

Remember, your professional life and your personal life go hand in hand. You cannot fix one without understanding the other.

Chapter 1.

Something is Not Right

At some point, usually somewhere in the mid-30s, something shifts. Something just does not feel right and you are not sure how you got here.

You cannot always name it. It is not a crisis. Nothing has gone dramatically wrong. The job pays well enough. The relationship is fine. The flat or the house is decent. From the outside, anyone looking in would say you are doing alright.

But there is a voice. Quiet, persistent, impossible to switch off. Something is not right and I am not sure how I got here.

I have heard that sentence, or a version of it, from more people than I can count. Men and women both, though this book is written for the men. Not because women do not feel it. They do. But men tend to sit with it longer, say it to fewer people, and let it quietly hollow them out while they get on with appearing fine.

The drift is rarely dramatic. That is what makes it so hard to spot until you are already deep in it. Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to spend the next decade in the wrong career. Nobody stands at the altar thinking this is probably a mistake but let us see how it goes. It happens gradually, through a series of reasonable decisions that each made sense at the time.

For example, you have left university. You needed a job. You took one that was available. It paid the bills, which mattered because by then there were bills to pay. You met someone. Things moved forward in the way things do. The flat became a house. The relationship became a marriage, or felt like one. And somewhere in the middle of all of that forward momentum, the question of what you actually wanted got quietly buried under the question of what needed to happen next. I know this because I lived it.

In my early days in London I met Rachel at PwC. We were both doing well. Great jobs, good salaries, a social life built around work and weekends and people who were doing the same things we were doing. We got married. We bought a house in Kingston upon Thames and spent a long, expensive, stressful year or so renovating it. When it was finally finished, I stood in it and thought this would be a great family home.

That thought was the beginning of the end of my marriage.

I started making noise about kids. Rachel metaphorically froze. It was not one conversation, one moment where everything cracked open. It was a gradual realisation that we had never really spoken about the future. We had gone with the flow, both of us, assuming the other one felt roughly the same about what came next. She was an only child. Her parents had openly said they did not like children. Rachel, naturally and understandably, did not want any.

I am from a large family. I wanted children. I had thought about it enough to know I wanted two of my own and to adopt a third from somewhere children genuinely needed help. That is not a vague feeling. That is a value. And it was not being met. To this day, it still has not been met.

We did not fall out. There was no explosion, no villain. We sat with it, we talked, and eventually I made the decision to end it. We sold the house, made a bit of money on it, and both bought flats in Surbiton. I actually found Rachel's flat for her because it had access to a garden for the cat.

To this day Rachel and I are still friendly towards each other. She has remarried and has a child. Nobody was the bad person in that story. We even used an online divorce service to end the marriage. We were just two people who had built a life together without ever properly discussing what they each needed from it.

That is the drift. It does not always end in disaster. Sometimes it just ends quietly.

The question this chapter is asking you is simple. What have you not said out loud yet? Not to your partner, not to your boss, not to your mates. To yourself. What is the thing you know is missing that you have been getting on with ignoring because life is busy and the mortgage needs paying and it feels selfish or dramatic to want more when things are, on the face of it, fine.

Because that thing, whatever it is, does not go away. It just gets louder. And at some point you are going to have to deal with it.

This book is about helping you do that before it deals with you.

Chapter 2. The Yard

I was about thirteen or fourteen. I was in the Bon Accord yard, unloading empty glass bottles from the back of a lorry. The bottles were 1.1 litres, made of glass, stored in heavy crates of twelve. Serious weight. You did not carry one crate at a time if you were worth anything. I remember one delivery to a block of flats, three or four orders stacked up, sixty bottles across the crates, carried two or three flights of stairs in one go. My arms, my back, my legs. All of it working. I was fourteen or so years old and I absolutely loved it.

There were three or four lorries in the yard at any one time, loading and unloading, drivers and delivery lads moving around each other. The office was above our house, with a stairway leading up to it. My father would occasionally come down from the office to check on things, have a word with the drivers, see who was about.

That afternoon he stepped into the doorway at the top of the yard and looked out over it. Just stood there for a moment, taking in the scene. Two girls looked up. They were young, around my age, part time delivery workers like me. And they reacted in a way I had never seen directed at my father before. They nudged each other. "There he is, there he is". Flustered. Impressed. Not frightened of him. Respectful of him.

There is a difference and even at fourteen I could feel it.

My father looked across the yard, caught my eye, smiled, and that was it. He expected me to get on with my work. I was one of the lads. There was no favouritism, no acknowledgement that I was his son rather than just another delivery boy. He would not have wanted that and neither would I.

But I stood there with a crate of empty bottles and I thought, that is my dad. And then I thought, I want that.

Subconsciously, though I only understood it upon reflection, that moment planted something I have spent my whole career chasing. The respect.

I could not have told you at thirteen what I meant by that. I did not have the words for it. It was not about money. My father was not a wealthy man. He was very much working class, the same as everyone around him. He had been in the army from 1946 to 1948, a sergeant in logistics, and he carried something from that. A way of being that made people straighten up slightly when he walked into a room. Not because he demanded it. Because he had earned it.

That is what those two girls were reacting to. Not a title. Not a salary. Something harder to define and much harder to fake.

I grew up in a house of four kids. It was chaos most of the time, all of us competing for our parents attention in the way kids do in large families. I am not saying I was neglected. I am saying that in a house that loud and that busy, quiet moments of clarity were very rare, if at all. That afternoon in the yard was one of them.

Looking back, I think that moment planted something in me that has driven almost every decision I have made since. Not consciously. I did not walk away from that yard with a life plan. But somewhere underneath everything, the ambition to be a man that people respect, not fear, not envy, genuinely respect, took root.

My father died in July 1999. He was 74. I moved to London that same year.

I do not know whether he ever knew what he gave me that afternoon. He had no idea I was watching. He smiled at me across a yard full of lorries and empty bottles and went back up to his office. Just another day at work.

For me, I now know, it was the start of everything.

A Safe Pair of Hands

Throughout my career, people called me when things went wrong. Not because I was the most senior person in the room. Because I was the one who would say of course, let me get on with it, and then actually get on with it.

That reputation, being known as a safe pair of hands, did not come from a title or a qualification. It came from a series of moments under pressure where I had to perform and did. Let me tell you about two of them.

Black Friday. Accenture. Client Sainsbury's.

We at Accenture were responsible for the rollout of Chip and Pin across the Sainsbury's stores. The programme was about fifty percent deployed when roughly half of those deployed terminals went offline simultaneously.

We called it Black Friday.

Stores were losing millions by the hour. The backup for taking card payments was the old manual swipe machines, the kind where you put paper in and pressed hard. Each store had two of them. Customers who had no cash had to abandon their shopping and leave.

I had been brought in to take over the business as usual running of the programme. My new Client Services Director handed me the crisis. I am confident the client asked for me specifically because of how I had handled a previous situation involving a £232 million financial system failure. When it was discussed, I said of course, let me get on with it. I was a cocky, confident person. I never thought about it. I just got on with the job.

I pulled the technical teams together, worked with the Problem Management team, and once I fully understood the landscape, started to communicate. I visited the client headquarters, faced them directly, and told them what was going to happen. Then I based myself with the teams who were fixing the problem and reprioritised their work immediately. I was managing Accenture senior management who were unhappy that I had done so without asking, while simultaneously managing a client who was losing money and wanted answers every five minutes.

Fighting fires from both sides.

Rather than taking individual calls from senior client stakeholders who were constantly on the phone, I set up a conference call every fifteen minutes. If anyone phoned me outside of that I would not take the call and direct them to the next update. Many were unhappy. They were the client and I was the service provider, and I was telling them to wait. But it was the right call. We fixed the problem. The stores came back online. The losses stopped.

That is what composure under pressure actually looks like. Not calm. Controlled chaos with someone at the centre who knows exactly what needs to happen next.

The Basement in Berlin

SAP Sapphire

As a Business Relationship Manager within DTZ, my boss was running a £2 million CRM implementation that was going wrong. The business complained to the CIO. My boss was let go and I was parachuted in to take control of the programme.

As I got into it, I realised the proposed solution, SAP CRM, was too complex and too mature for where DTZ was as a business. I recommended switching to Salesforce. My CIO agreed. He then left it to me to tell SAP.

SAP had been courting DTZ aggressively. They wanted to break into our sector. It was estimated they had spent approximately £800,000 on entertainment and client development pursuing us. I flew to Berlin with a colleague for the SAP Sapphire conference. In the basement of the venue was a client suite where top clients were invited for meetings with European and Global Managing Directors. I was the only person invited in.

The conversation was unpleasant. The MD made clear what effort and investment SAP had put in. I told him I was sorry but their product was too mature for our current needs, that I had agreed with my board and key stakeholders, and we were going with Salesforce. My colleague, who had travelled with me, understood before we walked in that I was in complete control and he was to stay quiet. He later told the team back home what he had witnessed.

My CIO should have been in that room. He was not. I got a well done when I returned. Nothing more. I did not dwell on it. I went back and delivered the Salesforce CRM programme.

I tell these stories for one reason. The man who walked into those rooms is the same man who wrote this book. He got knocked sideways for twelve years. He is still here. And he is still a safe pair of hands.

That is the point of telling you this. Not to impress you. But because for the advice in this book to mean anything, you need to know that I have been somewhere real professionally, not just somewhere difficult personally.

Chapter 3. Get Over Yourself

Let me tell you about a phone call I nearly did not make.

A few months ago I was in a difficult period financially. The Art of Speaking is in startup mode. Good product, the right audience, now the work of getting it in front of them. That takes time.

My best friend Patrick, who I have known for over twenty years and who is a brother to me, was encouraging me to speak to a close colleague about a potential role. Patrick and this close colleague had both gone on to be significantly more successful professionally than I had been in recent years. They were operating at a level I used to operate at and felt I should still be operating at.

The idea of asking for help made me feel sick.

Not because the colleague was unapproachable. Not because the opportunity was not right. Because of what asking felt like. Here I am. A man who has sat across the table from senior partners at PwC, who has managed teams and budgets and complex programmes, who has always prided himself on providing for himself and standing on his own two feet. And now I am the one who needs something. Cap in hand.

The embarrassment of that is real. Do not let anyone tell you it is not. The question it triggers in your head is not logical. It is not will this work out or is this the right role. It is will Patrick and this colleague judge me.

Will they pity me.

Will they talk about me differently after this. Will asking for help change what they think of me permanently.

That is ego. And ego, left unchecked, will cost you more than any failed job application ever will.

I also did something else during those twelve years that I am not proud of. I stopped reaching out to old colleagues. People I had worked with at Accenture for example, people I had been equals with, good at the same things, operating at the same level. They had moved on to bigger roles, more senior positions, greater success by any external measure.

And somewhere along the way I went quiet on them. Did not pick up the phone. Did not drop them a message. Did not show up in their world.

Because showing up felt like showing up at that friend's door in Surbiton after Clapham. Like arriving in circumstances that did not match the version of me they had known.

That silence cost me. I have no doubt about it.

Here is what I know from years of coaching people through exactly this. Personal life and professional life are not separate. They never were. The man who is struggling at work is usually carrying something at home. The man who has gone quiet on his network is usually protecting something internally. We act as though these things exist in different compartments and they do not. They are the same man, the same set of fears, the same ego trying to hold a shape that life has already changed.

And here is the thing about ego. We all have one. Every single person you are embarrassed to call, every former colleague you think has moved beyond you, every successful contact you have been avoiding, they all have a shit in the morning the same as you do. They have all had periods they are not proud of. They have all needed something from someone at some point. The ones who moved forward fastest are usually the ones who asked for help earliest and most directly.

So let me say this as plainly as I can.

Work out what ego you are protecting. Work out what the pride is actually about. And then get over it and make the call. If you cannot work it out on your own, and many people cannot, get a coach or a therapist to help you do it. That is not weakness. That is the most direct, experienced and realistic thing you can do for yourself.

The call I nearly did not make to Patrick? I made it. Nothing came of it, the role was not the right fit, and I am ok with that. But I made the call.

And that matters more than the outcome.

The calls to old Accenture colleagues I did not make? I wish I had made them sooner. That silence was entirely about me and it served nobody, least of all myself.

Chapter 4. Why something feels wrong

Let me explain what a value actually is, because it is not what most people think.

It is not a feeling. It is not a mood or a preference or something that changes depending on the day. A value is something deeper than that. It is something that is core to who you are, something you need to be expressing or receiving in order to feel right. When it is present you probably do not notice it, the same way you do not notice when you are breathing normally. When it is absent, everything feels slightly off and you cannot always put your finger on why.

Here is a simple example. If honesty is a core value for you, you do not need someone praising you every five minutes. But you do need the people around you to be straight with you. When they are not, something nags. You feel unsettled in environments where people say one thing and mean another. You cannot fully trust people who are not direct. That discomfort is not weakness. It is a value being violated.

For me, my core value is respect. Not constant affirmation, not someone telling me every minute that I am brilliant at my job. But I do need the appropriate people to appreciate what I bring and to respect my opinion. That matters to me. On the flip side I need to respect the people I work with. And what is core to that is authenticity and integrity. If I see those missing in someone I cannot respect them, and if I cannot respect them I cannot work properly alongside them. I have left roles because of that. I have clashed with people because of that. And looking back, every single time that feeling was there, it was a value telling me something was wrong long before my head caught up.

Values also explain why two people can be in the same job, on the same salary, with the same title, and one of them is energised and one of them is hollowed out. The job is not the issue. The fit is the issue. Let me give you an example from my own career of what it feels like when a value is fully expressed.

I was working for Accenture, and Sainsbury's was the client, at the time Accenture's largest. I was the Client Services Manager. A serious problem emerged with the Oracle Financials system that had been migrated across. The books could not be closed properly. The impact was that £232 million would need to be reported to the FSA and explained. My boss took an uninterested approach. Never treated it with the seriousness it deserved. The client went ballistic, and rightly so.

I jumped in. Travelled to meet the client's team, understood what was going on, and managed the situation. My boss was moved on at the client's request. The client asked for me to take control.

I worked with that team day and night. One of the things I came up with was a business continuity plan for paying suppliers manually by cheque, the same amounts as the previous month, while the technical teams worked to fix the system. Then once it was resolved, do a true up with suppliers, be transparent with them about the problem and how it was being handled. It was straightforward. It was practical. It was honest.

One of the client's managers disagreed with my plan so strongly that he started swinging a computer mouse on its wire and threatened me with it physically. The senior client stopped him. Agreed with my plan. We implemented it.

I tell that story not to big myself up. I tell it because of how it felt. That was respect. Earned in a room under real pressure, with real consequences, by doing the right thing and being straight about it. That is what a value being fully expressed feels like. You do not need anyone to tell you. You just know.

Now let me tell you what it feels like when a value is absent.

I worked for a large property developer. The IT Director was not an IT Director in any meaningful sense. He was a Finance Manager who had inherited IT and never really taken ownership of what that meant. The place was toxic. He had a pattern of hiring a management team and then letting them go before employment protection laws kicked in. We clashed repeatedly. I asked straightforward questions. He could not answer them or did not want to. One day we argued and he sacked me.

I was not surprised. I was angry, but I was not surprised. Because the values that matter most to me, respect, straight talking, competence, authenticity, were absent from that environment every single day I walked in. The sacking was just the moment it became official.

Here is the thing about values and why this chapter matters for you.

That feeling you have been carrying, the one that says something is not right but you cannot name it, is almost always a value that is not being met. Not a problem with your salary. Not a problem with your commute. Not a problem with your boss's personality, though that might be a symptom. A value that you hold deeply that your current situation is not allowing you to express or receive.

When my coaching clients work through the values process, the moment it lands is unmistakable. It is an aha moment. Not dramatic. Just quiet recognition. And then over the days and weeks that follow, something shifts. Because now they have a name for it. And once you have a name for something, you can do something about it.

That sense of relief is what I want you to feel.

So here is what I want you to do. Take some time, on your own, away from your phone and your inbox, and think about the following questions honestly.

What are the four or five things that, when present in your work and your life, make you feel like yourself. Not happy necessarily. Just right. Like you are operating as the person you actually are.

And then ask yourself where those things are missing right now.

The answers will not solve everything. But they will tell you more about why something feels wrong than any amount of staring at your LinkedIn profile ever will.

If you want to go deeper on this, work with a coach. A good one will take you through a proper values process and help you sit with what comes up. It is worth the investment.

Chapter 5. What do you actually want

I am going to ask you a question now that sounds simple and is not. What do you actually want. Not what you think you should want. Not what your partner wants. Not what would make sense given your mortgage and your kids and your current salary. What do you actually want to do with your working life.

Take a moment with that. Because in my experience, most people cannot answer it immediately. They go quiet. They say something like I am not sure, or I have never really thought about it. And that is not a failure of imagination. It is the result of years of making decisions based on what was available or what was needed rather than what was actually wanted.

So let us go back to the beginning. When did you leave school. Did you go to university. If you did, why that course. What was your thinking when you picked it. And if you did not go, why not, and what happened next.

I ask these questions not to be nostalgic. I ask them because the choices made at sixteen or eighteen, often under pressure, often without proper guidance, are frequently still running the show twenty years later. The accountant who studied accounting because his dad was an accountant. The IT manager who fell into technology because he was good with computers at school. The marketing director who studied history because she liked it and then spent thirty years wondering how she ended up here.

Most people did not choose their careers. Their careers chose them, based on what was available at the moment they needed something.

And then life arrived.

The relationship. The flat. The mortgage. The holidays. The promotion that tied you to a company you were not sure about but the money was too good to walk away from. And then, for a lot of men, the moment that changes everything. You look at your life, the mortgage, the wife, the kids on the way, and you think, fuck, how do I pay for all of this.

That is the moment the drift becomes a trap. Because from that point on, the question you are asking yourself every morning is not what do I want. It is what can I afford to want. And those are completely different questions with completely different answers.

Before you answer that question, I want to challenge something you might not have questioned before.

The idea that a career means one job, one employer, one straight line from here to retirement is largely finished. Long gone are the days of joining a company at twenty-two and leaving with a carriage clock at sixty-five. More and more people are building what is called a portfolio career. Moving from role to role, picking up skills and income along the way, building a working life that fits around the life they actually want rather than the other way around.

Someone might work three days a week in a well-paid contract role and spend the other four travelling. Someone else might combine a part-time corporate job with a side income they have built online. And before you dismiss that as something other people do, look at what is happening around you. TikTok is full of people selling things, most of it shite, but they are making a living doing it on their own terms. The digital world has made income more flexible than it has ever been. The question is whether you are thinking flexibly enough to take advantage of that.

So when I ask you what you want, I am not just asking which rung of the corporate ladder you are aiming for. I am asking what your life needs to look like. What flexibility do you need. What income do you actually need, not what you think you should be earning, but what you genuinely need to live the life you want. And is there a way of building that which you have not seriously considered yet because you have been too busy surviving to think about it.

So here is what I want you to do. Not a form to fill in. A conversation with yourself. Honest answers only. Nobody is watching.

Start here. What would you do for work if money was not the immediate pressure. Not forever. Just if you had six months of bills covered and you could make a considered decision rather than a desperate one. What would you actually go for.

Then ask yourself this. What are you good at that you actually enjoy. Not just good at. Good at and enjoy. Because competence without enjoyment is just a well-paid prison sentence.

Then the personal side, because this matters as much as the professional and most career tools ignore it entirely. Work affects home and home affects work. They are not separate. So what does your life need to look like. Where do you want to live. What kind of hours can you genuinely sustain. What does your family need from you financially and in terms of time. What are you not willing to sacrifice.

Write those answers down. Actual words on actual paper or a screen. Not in your head where they can stay vague and comfortable. Written down where you have to commit to them.

Then look at what you have written and ask yourself one more question. Is what I am doing now moving me towards any of that. Or am I just getting on with it because getting on with it feels safer than admitting I want something different.

There is no wrong answer. But there is an honest one. And the honest one is the only one worth having.

If this process surfaces things you cannot resolve on your own, that is normal. Most people need someone to think alongside. A good coach will help you work through the career evaluation properly, challenge the answers that are too comfortable, and hold you to account for the ones that require action. That is what coaching is for.

But start here. Start with the question.

What do you actually want.

Chapter 6. What do you need

There is a difference between a value and a need, and it matters.

A value is internal. It is something soft, something inside you, a core part of who you are that needs to be expressed or received. Respect. Integrity. Straight talking. When a value is missing you feel it as a kind of wrongness, a background hum that something is off.

A need is more physical. More immediate. It is something you require in order to function. Not just to feel good. To function.

Most people have heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs even if they cannot name all the levels. The basic idea is straightforward. Human beings need certain things in a certain order. At the bottom you need safety and security. A roof. Food. Physical safety. Above that you need belonging, connection, people around you. Above that you need esteem, to feel valued and respected by others and by yourself. And at the top, which most people rarely reach and fewer still sustain, you need to feel you are becoming who you are capable of being.

The point of the hierarchy is this. If the bottom levels are not met, nothing above them matters. You cannot worry about your career development when you do not know where you are sleeping. You cannot work on your self-esteem when your basic security has gone. The most urgent unmet need takes over everything. It is all you can think about.

In those twelve years I described earlier in this book, I was not missing one level of that hierarchy. I was missing all of them at various points simultaneously.

Safety. There were periods where I did not know where I was living.

Security. I was broke twice. Not short of money. Broke.

Belonging. The court process, the accusations, the arrest, all of it isolated me in ways that are hard to describe. You do not tell people everything. You cannot. So you carry it largely alone.

Esteem. I had spent twenty years building a professional identity and a reputation. That took a serious hit during those years in ways I could not fully control.

And the top of the hierarchy, becoming who I am capable of being, felt like a distant joke on the worst days.

I am not telling you this for sympathy. I am telling you because needs, when they go unmet long enough, stop being background noise and start driving every decision you make. Often in ways you do not recognise until later. The man who takes a job he is wrong for because he needs the security right now. The man who stays in a relationship that is not working because the belonging it provides is better than the alternative. The man who stops networking because his esteem has taken such a hit that he cannot face being seen.

I have been all of those men.

And here is what I know from the other side of it. You cannot think your way out of an unmet need. You have to meet it. Which means being honest, first with yourself and then with the people around you, about what you actually need right now. Not what you should need. Not what you needed five years ago. What you need now.

So ask yourself this. Looking at those levels, safety, security, belonging, esteem, becoming who you are capable of being, go and Google Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and sit with it for a moment. Where are you solid and where are you not. Which level is the one that is pulling your attention away from everything above it.

Because that is where the work starts. Not with the career evaluation. Not with the values. With the most basic unmet need. Get that one addressed first, even partially, and everything else becomes clearer.

If you are not sure where to start, that is what a coach or therapist is for. Not to fix you. To help you see clearly what you already know but have not yet been able to say out loud.

One practical note on finding the right person. Whether you are looking for a coach or a therapist, meet at least three before you commit to working with one.

Each conversation will feel different. Follow your gut. You are going to be working closely with this person and sharing things you have probably never said out loud before.

You need to like them, trust them, and respect them. Do not settle for the first one you speak to simply because it feels easier than continuing to look.

What you cannot name, you cannot fix

After years of fractious co-parenting with my daughter's mother following our separation, I reached a point where I simply could not make sense of what I was dealing with. The conflict never stopped. There was no version of a conversation that ended peacefully. I could not find a way to communicate that did not result in more chaos. And through all of it, my daughter was in the middle.

One May day bank holiday, I dropped my daughter off at her mother's. I was about twenty minutes later than we had agreed because my daughter and I had fallen asleep together. Her mother's new partner was there. He came towards me and started verbally abusing me about the time. Then he told me he was going to slit my throat.

My daughter was about four or five years old. She was within earshot, just inside the door.

I looked at him and asked him, if he was going to hit me, could we take it round the corner so that my daughter did not have to witness it.

He backed off. I left shaken.

I got in the car and drove off. Once I was away from the mother's house, I stopped the car and called a good friend and told him what had happened. He suggested I contact the police to have it recorded. I did.

When I had time to reflect on that moment, something shifted in me. Whatever I was doing, I was not winning. I was not managing the situation. I was reacting to it and it was costing me and, more importantly, it was costing my daughter.

I decided to seek out therapy. Not because I thought I needed it in the traditional sense. But because I needed to understand what I was dealing with. I needed someone to help me make sense of my daughter's mother.

Through that process, my therapist advised me that there was a very high possibility that my daughter's mother had Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or NPD.

In today's world of social media you will hear the word narcissist used constantly. Influencers get called it. Politicians get called it. Difficult colleagues and ex-partners get called it. Most people using the word have no idea that there is an actual clinical mental health condition behind it. NPD is real, it is specific, and it is one of the hardest things to deal with in a close personal relationship because the normal rules of communication and compromise simply do not apply.

If any of this resonates with your own situation, I would point you towards two places. Search for Dr Phil, the well known TV shrink who I have a lot of time for. He is straight talking and common sense, exactly the kind of voice that cuts through on a subject like this. Search his name and NPD on YouTube. And search for Caroline Strawson on Instagram. Both are powerful and both will give you more clarity on what NPD actually looks like than anything I could write here.

From the point I understood what I was dealing with, everything changed. Not overnight. But the therapy shifted from trying to fix the situation to understanding it. And once I understood it I could manage it rather than fight it.

My life is considerably more peaceful now because of that.

The lesson is the same one that runs through this entire book. You cannot deal with what you cannot name. Whether it is a value that is missing, a need that is not being met, an ego that is in your way, or a personality disorder in someone you are co-parenting with. Name it first. Everything else follows from there.

The Warning Signs

Nobody wakes up one morning in crisis. It builds. And the early signs are so ordinary that most men miss them entirely or explain them away.

It starts with questions you cannot stop asking yourself. How did that happen. Why did that happen. Nothing dramatic. Just a low level hum of something not sitting right that you cannot quite name.

Then your body starts to tell you what your head has not yet admitted. You stop sleeping properly. You wake up tired. You become irritable in ways that surprise even you. Small things feel bigger than they should. The patience you normally have starts to thin.

Then something shifts in a conversation. You are having a pint with a mate, not a serious conversation, just talking, and something comes out. A situation you have been carrying. And your mate looks at you and says what the fuck, that does not sound right.

And you brush it off. But you do not forget it.

That is the moment. The shower moment. The one that comes a few days later when you are standing under the water and your brain finally processes what your mate said, and something in you quietly agrees with him. That does not sound right.

That is not a crisis. That is a warning. And it is worth paying attention to before it becomes something harder to come back from.

If you are in that moment right now, go back and read Chapter 3. Then go and find someone to talk to. Not to fix it. Just to say it out loud to another person. That is where it starts.

The Close

I want to be straight with you before I finish.

I have not written this book to gain your sympathy. I have not written it to impress you or to present myself as someone who has navigated life perfectly. I am still navigating it. I wrote it because I spent most of my life going with the flow, never planning, never stopping to think about what I actually wanted, and I want you to think seriously about what can happen when you do the same.

Let me give you a sense of what the last twelve years of my life have looked like.

I have been broke twice. Not short of money. Broke. I have been very close to homelessness. I have been arrested for something I did not do, spent a night in a cell, and nearly went to Wandsworth Prison because I was too proud to ask two friends for help. I have fought through the courts for years to maintain access to my daughter, at enormous financial and personal cost. The family court system in the UK is statistically weighted against fathers. That is not opinion. It is documented and it needs to be said. I have been accused of things that were untrue and had to sit with that while the process ground on. After the relationship with the mother of my daughter ended I was lucky enough to find another relationship. It did not work out in the end, but we remain great friends and I cannot thank her enough for the support she gave me during one of the hardest periods of my life.

I have had days where I thought seriously about not being here anymore.

I have thought about suicide. I am putting that in plain language because plain language is the only language worth using on a subject like that. On the days when the list of things going wrong felt endless and the weight of it all was too much, those thoughts came. What brought me back every time was one thing. My daughter. I needed to be her dad. That was enough. It was always enough.

I am not alone in that. Suicide is the single biggest killer of men under the age of 50 in the UK. Not cancer. Not heart disease. Suicide. Three quarters of all registered suicide deaths in the UK are men. That statistic does not get said enough and it needs to be said plainly. If you have ever had those thoughts, you are not weak and you are not unusual. You are part of a pattern that nobody talks about nearly enough.

I have been to therapy. I have done the work. And I am still here, still trying, still building something. The Art of Speaking is real. This book is real. I am not at the bottom anymore (just).

The turning point, if I had to name one, was 2022. That was the year Iain Maclean and I decided to stop making other people rich and build something of our own. We were both fed up of being the person who delivered results for organisations and walked away with a salary while others took the credit and the upside. PI Advisory was the result of that decision. It did not take off immediately. We did pilots, we tried to sell it, it did not work at first and we both had to go and earn elsewhere to keep the bills paid. But the decision was made. We were building something that was ours. That shift, from reacting to life to choosing something deliberately, is what this book is about.

There is one more thing I want to say and I am going to say it plainly because that is the only way I know how.

Some of the people reading this will know me personally. Friends, family, people who have watched the last twelve years from the outside and drawn their own conclusions. I know I have been judged. I know there are people close to me who have never truly understood what I was dealing with or what it cost me. People who looked at where I ended up and thought the answer was simple. Just get a job. This book is partly my answer to that.

Not defensively. Not to settle scores. But because I have never had the right moment or the right words to explain the full picture to the people I care about. I hope this gives them a deeper understanding without the need for a conversation that neither of us quite knows how to have.

If you are one of those people and you are reading this, now you know. And I hope it changes something, even slightly, in how you see what I have been through.

But I want you to understand something about how I got into that position in the first place. I never planned anything. I left school without a plan. I moved from job to job without a plan. I got married without properly discussing what we each needed from the future. I drifted into circumstances and then reacted to them rather than choosing them. Nobody in my house ever talked to me about university, about career planning, about what I wanted my life to look like. So I just went with the flow and trusted that things would work out.

Sometimes they did. Sometimes they did not.

If I could sit down with my younger self, I would say one thing. Take the time. Stop. Reflect. Plan. Not obsessively, not rigidly, but deliberately. Think about what you want before life decides for you. Because life will decide for you if you let it, and it will not always choose well.

I do this with my daughter constantly. I ask her questions. Not to pressure her, but to get her thinking a little deeper about things that matter. I want her to grow up with the habit of reflection that I never had.

I want her to know that planning is not boring. It is the thing that gives you choices.

One more thing before I finish. The barrister. I have to get this off my chest.

I hired a barrister to fight my access to my daughter. We agreed terms. He came recommended and my instinct at the time was that he was the right person. He was not. He saw my fifteen year old Porsche Cayenne, worth about two thousand pounds, in the car park before we met. His first reaction was to go onto Facebook and post something that made it clear he thought I was lying about my financial situation. He made a wrong judgement about me. His lawyer friends piled in on the comments. My name was not mentioned. But I knew it was me. I found it by accident, Facebook suggesting him as someone I might know.

In court, he had no teeth. He was not ruthless. And I think, though I cannot prove it, that he stepped back from the argument because he had already decided I was not worth the effort.

He is one of life's true wankers. I say that plainly and without apology. Should he die of a serious itch, of course I would not smile.

But my lesson from that experience is not just about him. It is about me. I trusted my instinct, went with it, and it was wrong. And I had nobody to sense check it with. No mentor. No trusted confidant I could call and say does this feel right to you. When you are in the middle of something difficult and frightening, your instinct is not always reliable. You are too close to it. Too emotional. Too desperate for it to work.

Get a mentor. Find someone you trust, who has no stake in the outcome, who will tell you the truth rather than what you want to hear. You do not think about doing that when you are in the moment. I did not. My reflection is I wish I had. Get a mentor.

So. You have read this book. You have read about the drift, about ego and pride, about values and needs, about asking yourself what you actually want. And you have read about what can happen when a life goes unexamined for too long.

I have one piece of advice. Just one.

Ask for help.

Not when you are at the bottom. Before you get there. Ask the person you trust. Ask the mentor you should find. Ask the coach or the therapist. Ask the friend you have been too proud to call.

The book opened with a man at a custody desk in Clapham who told a sergeant he had nobody, because asking felt like too much. That man nearly went to Wandsworth Prison for it.

Do not be that man. Ask for help.

I am building something. The Art of Speaking, The Confident Voice and The Board Brief, a suite of communication programmes I co-founded and believe in. And this book. None of it existed five years ago. That tells you something about what is possible when you stop drifting and start choosing.

If this book has resonated with you and you want to take it further, I take on a small number of coaching clients each year. Four or five people at most. I am not a volume operation. If you feel ready to have a direct, honest conversation about where you are and where you want to be, you can reach me at paulw@piadvisory.uk.

And wherever you find your support, whether that is a coach, a therapist, or simply someone you trust enough to be honest with, the fact that you have read this far means you have already done the hardest part. You have admitted to yourself that something needs to change.

That is not nothing. That is everything.

A Note on Memory

The events in this book are drawn from my own memories and experiences. I have written them as honestly and accurately as I can. I acknowledge that others who were present for some of these events may remember them differently or have a different perspective on what happened. That is the nature of memory and of human experience. This is my account, told in my own words, for my own reasons. It is not intended to cause harm or upset to anyone.

Reflections

A 5 Minute Exercise

Life Scoring. Score each area of your life out of 10. Zero is the worst it could be, ten is the best. Be honest. Nobody is watching.

In the first column give your score today. In the second column write the score you would like it to be in 6 to 12 months. The gap between those two numbers is where your work is.

Area of life	Score today (0-10)	Target score in 6-12 months (0-10)
Love Life		
Career		
Finances		
Family		
Friends		
Interests and Passions		
Spirituality / Religion		
Fitness		
Weight		
Diet		
Health		
Sleep Quality		
Energy Level		
Time Management		
Organisation skills		
Self Discipline		

Area of life	Score today (0-10)	Target score in 6-12 months (0-10)
Clarity of Goals		
Stress Level		
Addictions / Bad Habits		
Social Skills		
Motivation Level		
Self Confidence		
Self Love		
General Happiness		

Date completed:

Come back to this in 6 months and score yourself again. The difference between where you started and where you are is the measure of how deliberately you have been living your life. This is also the starting point you can give a coach or therapist should you decide to work with one.