

We Have Everything We Need



**How To Thrive When
Nothing Is Certain.**

Jindy Mann



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All proceeds of this book go to mental health charities in the UK. To find out more, contact book@selfishleader.com.

Thanks to [Sanjana Chappalli](#) for her editing skills and encouragement.

KINDLE edition

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Prologue: How I wrote this book

I'm sitting alone in a wooden cabin, thinking. This book came to me then.
All the ideas and thoughts. From scratch.

I'd love to pretend that is true.

It isn't.

There are no unique ideas. Sure, I've spent time ruminating, pickling ideas, trying out arguments and mashing things together. But the ideas themselves? All borrowed, wittingly or unwittingly, from others¹.

At times, we even steal ideas. They're floating around and we reach out and grab them. That word Inspiration? The mythology associated with that word talks of angelic muses descending to breathe ideas into our ears.

Our greatest and most original ideas then are taken from someone else.

¹ Thanks to Paul Arden for this wisdom. I highly recommend his book *'It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want To Be'*.

This book then is a collection of thoughts and ideas, collated from my own meander through work, life and self-reflection. This is what I've observed and learned elsewhere.

When I can attribute an idea to someone, I've included footnotes. There is an exhaustive list of references at the back should you want to dive into the themes.

I hope you'll find at least one thing that's useful.

Jindy

Introduction: We have everything we need

What is the smallest thing in the world?

In the 1990s, if we wanted to know the answer to that question, quite likely you went to a library or asked someone who studied physics. Today, we'd ask Google or Alexa or Siri and we'd hear about a quark being the smallest thing in the world.

Having access to facts and evidence used to be a superpower in the past.

Today, information is everywhere and it's available to everyone. Knowledge is no longer a special advantage limited to those who studied in academic institutions.

Consider the pace of change. People who are entering the professional workplace today were born around 1999. In 1999, the first iPhone hadn't been invented yet and Google was only a few years old. Social media didn't exist and newspapers and broadcasts were still our main way of understanding the world.

Today, everything has changed. Facts and evidence are now often disputed. With good and bad consequences, consciously or not, everyone is absorbing masses of information.

And in a world flooded by information, some of us are empowered and thriving. Others are awakening. Many are drowning.

What superpowers do we need today? What decisions should we make when the world is changing so rapidly? Which skills should we practice and master? How will our success be determined? Who is in charge - us or someone else?

Now, more than ever, we need skills and mindsets that sit outside industrialised education and workplace training. Concepts and topics that won't be found on a curriculum or a prospectus.

Self-inquiry. Curiosity. Empathy. Deep listening. Problem-solving. Storytelling. These are the new superpowers we need in the information age we're in.

The good news? We inherently possess these. In fact, we're hardwired for them because they've been with us since the dawn of humanity, passed through millennia and taught throughout the ages by great civilisations.

We all need to go on this journey - to understand our authentic selves as deeply as possible and share that person with the world.

Our superpowers are lying dormant waiting to be uncovered.

We have everything we need.

Chapter 1: Start with you

"If you are here unfaithfully with us, you're causing terrible damage." Rumi

You're a leader. In fact, all of us are leaders.

We're taking the lead and making something happen - when we parent, run an organization, head a team, shape our lives.

As leaders, we create movements - movements that need followers. Your first follower is yourself.

What do you know about 'you'?

Most of what shapes us - our values and beliefs - are instilled very early in life. We're consciously aware of only some of these. Most, however, slip by unnoticed.

In time, these values become our shadow self². We mistakenly call it ego, sometimes. It lies unexplored, unexamined and yet influences everything we do with more power than we realise³.

² 'A Little Book On The Human Shadow', by Robert Bly

³ 'Inner Work', by Robert A Johnson

By the time we reach the end of our teens, we begin making decisions that shape the course of our lives. Pretty soon, we're given the keys to the world, and we're off. "Don't look back, don't look down - just ahead and up!" is the ethos we embrace.

And so it is that we find ourselves as leaders with 'unexamined lives'⁴. We have responsibility and influence over others whilst not fully understanding our own selves.

We're led to believe that great leaders have vision, courage, empathy, selflessness, integrity. And yet most of us fail as we try to cultivate these traits and be perfect, idealized leaders. We need to understand instead, the sort of leader that each of us can be, instead of aiming for a generic standard.

We must realise that we're stumbling around or charging ahead. Often, we do this with blinkers on, our outlook ever narrowing even as our responsibilities increase. We have to stop to ask who we are and why we're doing this. How do you know where to head to if you don't truly understand where you are now?

⁴ *"The unexamined life is not worth living"* is a quote from Socrates at his trial for impiety. He believed the pursuit of wisdom was the most important way to live life.

Your first follower is you. Let's start with you.

This is the only place to start.

Chapter 2: A *good* advisor and a *great* advisor.

We usually speak to an advisor when we need help.

We might want to know how to run our company, what to do with relationships or which investments to make. We turn to an advisor seeking an expert view.

The reason advisors get paid is the asymmetry of knowledge - they know something that we don't, and that's worth something. The more they know relative to us, the more they charge.

Advisors can feel expensive - 'feel' is the right term here because 'expensive' is a relative term. If they provide more value than they charge, then advisors are not expensive. The question is whether we're getting value - the most bang for our buck.

The first place people usually look for advisors is someone close to where they are now - someone who understands their life, their business, their industry. They know exactly what we're doing so they're the best person to advise us, right?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Consider how closely an advisor matches you. If their skills, experience, mindset, values, worldview are exactly the same (or very similar) to ours, they're probably not an advisor - they're a close friend. They shouldn't be invoicing us.

If an advisor has some overlap in these areas, or matches with us to a great extent, she is likely to be a good choice.

If you're running a retail business, you might look for someone who has worked in several retail businesses across their career or run a business of a similar size and complexity to yours. They get your problems and they're more skilled or experienced in solving them. They have a slightly broader view of the world than you. Bingo.

Maybe. Maybe not.

There's a way to broaden the asymmetry of knowledge whilst increasing the value we get: advisors who are mismatched with us. Most of us overestimate the amount of overlap we need with our advisors, because we overestimate how complicated our work is. Subconsciously, we also want to avoid conflict and prefer to have an advisor who agrees with us.

A great advisor needs to have enough knowledge to understand the context of our problems but doesn't necessarily need to be an expert*. More importantly, a great advisor will bring perspectives and experience that sit way outside our field or our comfort zone⁵.

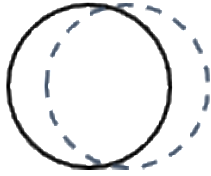
This may indeed lead to friction. And that friction is where the juice is. It's where the most value is created, the best ideas, the highest opportunities for learning. Like a muscle needs to be overloaded for it to strengthen, our mindset needs to be challenged for our thinking and creativity to grow.

If you want a great advisor, look for someone you don't recognise.

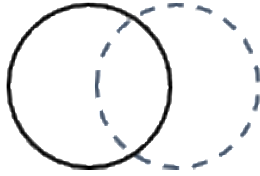
If you want someone who will mostly agree with you, then you can find someone a lot cheaper than your usual advisors. You could even ask a friend.

⁵ The Art of Client Service - Robert Solomon

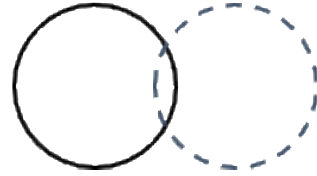
FRIEND



GOOD ADVISOR



GREAT ADVISOR



**(except in highly specialised fields - a generalist is little use for neurosurgery)*

Chapter 3: What's your currency?

Spend. From the Latin 'expendere'. Its original meaning was to *weigh out* or *pay out*, from back when goods and currencies were weighed out.

We often think of money as the main thing we spend, or the most important thing we spend. Money is not a natural occurrence. It's an artificial construct created around 5,000 years ago* as a ubiquitous tool of trade to allow people to compare the value of all goods (which became impossible with bartering)⁶.

Money, though, is not finite. Even when we spend all of what we have, we can make or borrow more. Governments and banks also create more out of thin air. There's always more money.

Time is another thing we say we spend, and might feel like a natural occurrence. We often talk about how we spend our time. But time too is an artificial construct. What we call time is actually dictated by planetary orbits over which we have no control. Humans have simply chopped it into convenient pieces to allow us to arrange our lives. Given that time is based on forces of the universe entirely beyond our control, it passes whether we

⁶ Money: Vintage Minis - Yuval Noah Harari

like it or not. Time is impossible to 'spend'. We can no more spend time than we can control the oceans or change the colour of the sky.

In reality, there's only one thing we can actually spend.

Attention.

Time passes regardless of what we do. We may have decided there are 24 things we call 'hours' in what we call a 'day', but this is irrelevant to the growth and decline of our physical bodies which determines how long we have on this planet. Between our birth and death, our only choice is what we give our attention to.

Attention is the seat of consciousness. And consciousness determines our experience of life. It won't sound woo-woo, if we explore further.

Consciousness is where several fields of science overlap with philosophy and spirituality. It's why the world's greatest minds are struggling with the challenge of creating Artificial General Intelligence - how do you determine when a mind is not just thinking and acting, but aware that it is doing so?

The only thing we have control over is the level of awareness we want to have in every single moment. This is why we talk about 'paying' attention.

Our currency is our attention. This is an enormous responsibility but also hugely empowering. We can spend attention how we like. We can make wars, make love, travel or stay still, look at phones, read books, climb trees or plant them. But once we've spent it, it's gone - attention is finite and irreversible.

What then, do you want to spend your attention on?

(*the first known currency is believed to be grains of barley).

Chapter 4: Who said we had to be one thing?

You're at a party and are introduced to someone. A minute into the conversation, they ask "So, what do you do?"*

What do you say? And why do people ask that question?

From a very young age, we're taught to believe we must define ourselves with a single word or job title. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

We're led to believe we must narrow ourselves until our profession, work or even life becomes one thing. Lawyer, builder, doctor, teacher, artist, consultant.

And so on.

We're also taught that we're defined by that one thing — which is why people ask that question at parties and social events.

Sure, you do other things. You play football, you cycle, go camping with the kids, skydive, paint, write poetry but you're a dentist. That's the box people want to put you in.

Imagine being defined by a career that we probably picked as a teenager? It's like picking one flavour of ice-cream to eat for the rest of our life, without trying any others.

What if we don't fit this paradigm of being defined by the way we spend our working hours? What if that's not how we define ourselves? Maybe we do several things? Maybe we *are* several things?

You might be a freelance copywriter a couple of days a week, spend a day running your eBay business, and do both of these to fund your passion for scuba diving for the rest of the week. So how would you describe yourself?

Here's a thing. How would people we recognise as great achievers respond if we asked them "What do you do?"

What would Elon Musk say? Oprah Winfrey? Stephen Fry? Maybe they'd respond with their mission instead of their job title. "I'm building technologies to save the planet." Or "I'm teaching the world to love itself".

What you 'do' isn't fixed either. As you change (and we all do), so will what you do and what you are⁷.

We can do whatever we want. There's never been so much choice, so much access to knowledge and so much freedom put into our hands. Which is why picking one thing that we 'do' is unimaginative, silly and high risk: the world needs generalists.

The world is changing faster than we can comprehend. In the US, approximately 25% of all jobs are at risk of being replaced or severely disrupted by automation.

⁷ David Epstein's new work on the triumph of generalists is one to explore.

Being a specialist or good at one thing (with some obvious exceptions) will become a risk. The people who will thrive in the world 30 years from now, will be generalists⁸. People who can do many things, knit together an array of disciplines and are skilled in systems thinking.

The world needs problem solvers and creators, not process executors. Plumbers will be ok though, it'll take a while to automate what they do.

Who said you had to be one thing? That's the question worth asking.

We can all explore more. We're born explorers.

More than ever, we should recapture our ability to explore.

**The best conversation starter I've ever heard is "What's your story?"*

⁸ Sir Ken Robinson, 'Schools Kill Creativity'

Chapter 5: Who do we work for?

Sure, we work for our boss, or our clients, or our shareholders, or even our employees. But they're stakeholders. Who do we *really* work for?

I think there's only really two answers to this:

1. We work for people who need what we provide - our family, people we support or people in need
2. We work for ourselves - our own self-worth and gain from doing the work we do

One or both of those reasons is the reason we go to work in the morning.

A friend of mine recently told me who he works for. He's married, has a 2-year old and works long hours in a senior management position. He's in the office by 8am, typically works when he gets home before dinner, then again after his daughter's bedtime, and most Sundays to catch up on things. He told me he was doing it for his daughter so she could see the importance of hard work.

Really? A 2-year old wants to spend less time with you to learn about hard work? I think he works partly to pay the bills but mainly because he loves what he does and the self-worth it gives him.

Why can't he say this?

Because, like many of us, he's living in a false prison. He doesn't want to say that he's often choosing work over more time with his family because that's not socially agreeable and feels selfish. So he lives with the narrative he's created.

We tell ourselves we 'have' to do the sort of work we're doing so that we can pay the bills. For some people that's true. For many of us, the bills are our choice. We choose where we live and how we live. What's more, we usually complain or stress about the bills whilst also complaining about not having enough time with family, friends and doing the other things we love.

If the real reason you work is for your pleasure or self-worth, they're worthy reasons - accept them. If too, it's because you love the size of your house(s), your car, holidays and other parts of your lifestyle, then also accept that you're working to pay for them and you've decided that on most days, they're more important than time with your family and friends. Stop feeling guilty and quit complaining - just make the choice.

Otherwise, make a change. Change what you own and what you spend on so you can spend more time doing the things you care about, whether that's time with your kids or playing the flute.

Either way, stop kidding yourself about who you work for. You'll be much happier.

Chapter 6: The importance of pointless things

When I was about 12 or 13, I used to spend a lot of time doing things that were pointless. Things like riding my bike around, wandering around woods and fields with my mates, drawing pictures, and so on. There was no purpose, no fixed plan for the next hour or day, just doing and being.

This, of course, is typical of most kids at that age. Then the teenage years kicked in, a mish-mash of hormones, experimentation, exams and rites of passage. Next, it was the planning and scheming of my twenties for me, as I exited university and entered the professional workplace, setting long-term goals, without spending too much time considering whether I really wanted them. After that came the unconscious strategizing and existential questioning of my thirties, always thinking about some objective, roadmap or point in the future.

Not much of it was spent doing things just for the sake of doing them. In other words, engaging in something because I really wanted to, without any expectations. In other words, being present. In other words — living.

To clarify, when I say 'pointless' things, I mean activities that don't have clear targets, goals, rules, deadlines. They don't serve any clear purpose or have any obvious extrinsic value. They're things done just because doing them is fun, nourishing or meets some deeper inner urge.

We give up these pointless things as we grow older. The systems we enter (education, workplaces, society) and the responsibilities we take on (loans, relationships, children) encourage us to become 'grown-up' and leave behind the selfish, indulgence of childhood. Our role increasingly becomes to act in ways that create some form of value for us or others.

This is obviously an important transition in our growth as humans. How could we function as adults if we didn't adapt to taking on this role? How could society operate if we didn't act with some purpose and responsibility? We couldn't build relationships, create businesses, develop careers, teach others or continue learning if we didn't have an inclination to plan and produce things of value.

And yet, it feels to me that we often go too far and tip the balance towards productive activity. We become captivated by a primary concern to produce value: I must do X to achieve Y which will help me get to Z. It becomes our unconscious, or even conscious, mantra.

Even our leisure time can become shaped by goals and targets — witness the explosion of marathon, ultra running, triathlon, cycling and high-intensity training in the last decade. Even mindful practices like yoga and meditation are now done with goals like weight-loss and productivity in mind.

It's not that we don't do fun or frivolous things. In fact, we find increasingly elaborate ways to do them that are scheduled into specific time periods and places, often in the form of holidays. "I'll chill out when I go on holiday" we tell ourselves, flying to somewhere far away in order to do so and we then find it difficult to 'switch off'; in other words, to revert to doing things without purpose — but we eventually do so just in time to get back on a flight home.

But most of the time, we are 'units of production', with a goal to produce extrinsic value. We've bought into the mantra of achievement and attainment at the expense of things that hold a much greater long-term benefit for our health and relationships.

As we enter into adulthood, things that don't serve a clear value seem frivolous, puerile, a waste of precious time, particularly when there are more

pressing concerns such as mortgages and children to look after. It's not without irony though, that spending time with your children is so much fun in part because it encourages play and improvisation.

The things I loved doing as a child, without questioning why or summoning any deep mental effort, were simple: being outdoors, playing sport, reading books, writing, drawing. With the exception of playing sport, I gradually gave up these things as I moved into adulthood, only to reclaim and reintegrate most of them much later when I realised how much I enjoyed them.

It's no coincidence that sport and fitness was the one exception, as these were the easiest activities for me to translate into goal-driven ones.

Running translated into 10k races, a half-marathon and then eventually a marathon — almost entirely so my ego could attain those badges of achievement. There was very little of me that ran those 26-miles for the pure joy of doing so. Football became very competitive, to the extent I had surgery three times to repair injuries. Going to the gym was all about increasing muscle to bulk up and look better.

Gradually, and long overdue, I realised the importance of play. I felt fatigued by having a goal or target for everything. I began to do things just because I enjoyed them. I now cycle long-distances but with no time record

in mind, only because I genuinely enjoy being on my bike (it reminds me of being a kid). I read a lot because I enjoy losing myself in a story or learning something new. I hike up mountains, not to get a first ascent or break records but because I love the outdoors. I increasingly seek out activities and habits that anchor me in the present moment and serve no purpose other than to feed some inner urge for joy and play.

I once read a memoir called 'Barbarian Days' written by journalist William Finnegan. The author recounts growing up in 1950s California and falling in love with surfing at a young age. It never held any promise of a career but became a lifelong obsession and in his early twenties, he and a friend travelled to remote parts of the world seeking out and riding waves in obscure places. As he grew older and his life took on a different meaning, his relationship with surfing changed but it has remained an integral part of his life, core to his identity — in part because of its utter uselessness.

At one point, Finnegan recounts how his pursuit of surfing in remote parts of Asia began to rub up against his own expanding world view and a battle against the feeling that he should be doing something more obviously valuable: "In the meantime, surfing became an excellent refuge from the conflict — a consuming, physically exhausting, joy-drenched reason to live.

It also, in its vaguely outlaw uselessness, its disengagement from productive labor, neatly expressed one's disaffection."

"Vaguely outlaw uselessness". I love that phrase. It evokes something important.

Back when I was 12, there was a corner of our school playground that had an inadvertent but perfectly formed 7-a-side goal. We'd spend summer days playing football there, sometimes spending an entire afternoon practicing free-kicks and penalties. I'd spend hours observing the clean arc of a ball as we tried to dip it into the corner of that goal, completely captivated by the one simple thing I was engaged in at that moment. Even when we did hit that spot, we'd attempt to replicate it endlessly. It was like being under a beautiful spell. As adults, we now call this being in flow.

What I've learned in my attempts to allow some pointlessness back into my life is that it takes practice and commitment — I need to break the guilt I associate with not doing something of value all the time. What I do know is that it makes for a happier, more creative and less judgmental person.

Here are three things to mull on:

1. Play is vital. Doing something that is utterly pointless other than it is fun and engaging, releases us from structured thinking. It creates a space where anything can happen and we allow ourselves to think in different ways without the burden of a goal or plan.
2. Stillness is precious but also rare. We are accustomed and conditioned to constant entertainment that means we never, ever have to be bored again. Even waiting in line for a coffee can mean an opportunity to check emails or social media. Choosing to do nothing and accepting an absence of stimulation can allow space for rare reflections and our greatest ideas.
3. Presentness brings clarity and focus through immersion in or commitment to an activity, that allows us to operate in flow. Mindfulness and play are great at enabling this state and it can also lead to an impact in the way we commit to other activities — including having better conversations with the people around us.

We could all do with a bit more pointlessness in our lives. It's not at the expense of productive or purposeful activity, but alongside it as a complement. More importantly, we need to do things just for the sake of doing them, for this is one of the incredible privileges we get as humans.

Every now and then, we can take off the guardrails, put down the rule book, switch off the phones and just do something that makes us feel alive in this very moment.

Chapter 7: Find your Minimum Viable Change

Are you familiar with the concept of a Minimum Viable Product? It's a well established approach in startups and product development - create the smallest possible version of your product or service that allows you to test whether it holds any value for customers.

If you want to test whether people are interested in your idea for a new food delivery service, you create a simple website for it, see how many people sign up and learn what they're looking for. You can then decide what to build and whether it's worth it.

What if we took a similar approach for challenging goals or change?

For example, learning to meditate can seem incredibly hard, partly because the effects of it are hard to notice in the short-term and yet it requires regular practice. Expecting to sit for an hour, or 30 minutes or even 10 minutes a day can seem too difficult.

How about starting by focussing on one breath? Just one. Consciously. This might take time to do well but eventually you will. Then you focus on more than one breath, or try it more than once a day. Eventually you'll feel

comfortable sitting for 5 minutes, focussing on your breath. Pretty soon, 10 minutes will feel fine.

This is basically a process of habit forming through the smallest possible increment - the Minimum Viable Change. It might feel ridiculous but if you want to get started, and you want to learn, pick the smallest possible thing you can do⁹¹⁰.

If you already have good habits and discipline, the incremental change principle is just as powerful. There's an ultrarunner and former special forces soldier called David Goggins. Amongst other things, he completed training for all three elite US military branches (NAVY SEALs, TACP and Army Rangers), he's a world-class ultramarathon runner (including 3rd place in a 135-mile race through Death Valley) and he holds the world record for pull ups. He achieved all of this with sickle cell trait and a hole in his heart.

By any measure, he's one of the toughest men on the planet. And yet, he says that when we reach what feels like our absolute maximum, we're only at 40% of our capabilities¹¹.

⁹ BJ Fogg's 'Tiny Habits' is excellent reading for habit forming...

¹⁰ ...as is James Clear's 'Atomic Habits'

¹¹ 'Can't Hurt Me' by David Goggins

One of the techniques he recommends is to make incremental improvements by removing the 'governator' that tells us to stop: add one more press-up at the end of your workout, write one more page of your book, spend five more minutes on that presentation. Do it regularly and keep on doing it.

The minimum change you can make adds up to a lot over time.

Chapter 8: The only comparison we should ever make

Change is hard to measure. In scientific experiments (or anything involving observable data), we can measure a current state and compare it to a previous state. We track change or progress in this way.

In our own lives, this is much harder to do, mainly because of the data collection problem. First, we're often unable to identify in any given moment what we really feel, beneath the surface noise and stimuli, and beneath our immediate reactions and emotions. Second, even if we are able to identify our true current state, we don't have an easy mechanism to record this on an ongoing basis.

When, for example, we have a difficult meeting at work, we don't have the time and resources to understand what was really going on. Why did I react that way? Why do I feel shitty right now? What am I angry about? Is there something deeper going on?

The real answers might be simple or they might be complex: difficulties at home right now which have left us feeling emotionally strained and vulnerable, or what was said in the meeting reflects a wider workplace pattern that conflicts with our core values. In the moment though, we'll probably just respond with something tactical: take a breath and armour up

for the next meeting, tell ourselves to buck our ideas up and stop being so weak, or continue to feel the anger and blame it on someone else in the meeting.

Bad data. Poorly reviewed. Consequently, no real change happens. Instead, without the ability to track and monitor what is going on, we revert to our underlying programs that tell us what to do next. Usually formed early in our lives, these underlying programs tell us how to define progress and success, and it's almost always the same for everyone: up and to the right¹².

Everything we do, our core programs tell us, should take us up and to the right. Like a high-performing tech stock, that's the trajectory our careers and lives should take and we measure it in arbitrary data points: job title, academic qualifications, salary, bonus, size of house, cars.

And whether we admit it or not, we often measure these things in relation to other people: sometimes against specific people, sometimes against the average (how much above the mean am I?).

Bad data. Poorly reviewed.

¹² Jerry Colonna: <https://www.reboot.io/2014/05/18/up-and-to-the-right/>

How then, can we measure the real change and progress we are making?

Here's some thoughts you can take or leave:

1. Reflection is a superpower. Taking the time to be still and to practice listening to what you're really feeling, will give you much better quality data about what is really going on for you. And you'll make better decisions with better data.

2. Practicing reflection compounds over time. You might get some immediate returns or revelations, but mostly, the benefit comes over the long term - incremental improvements in your ability to collect and analyse the data that gets more powerful, the longer it is practiced.

3. There's only one person you should compare yourself to: an earlier version of you. If you want to understand how and what you've changed, look at the broadest possible set of data points from an earlier point in time and compare them to now. You might be surprised at how far you've come. Or you might be shocked at the area you've made little progress in.

Here's one practice everyone can try:

Take a pen and some paper and find a quiet place. Write down the person you were 5 or 10 years ago in whatever data points are meaningful to you, but include ones that are not only objective (wealth, status, possessions) but also subjective: the levels of joy, freedom or peace you had; the time spent with people you care about and doing the things you love; your sense of self-worth and confidence; the breadth and depth of your

opinions, learning and worldview. Then do the same for the person you are now.

What has changed? What surprised you? What pleased you? What would you like to change?

*"One of the most powerful freedoms we possess is to choose who we compare ourselves to for our sense of social worth. Nobody dictates who each of us selects as our peers."*¹³

¹³ From a fantastic collection of modern philosophy, 'The Wonderbox', by Roman Krznaric

Chapter 9: Slow down. Listen. Repeat.

Taking a deep breath has become a cliché. Which is a shame because it's probably one of the simplest and most powerful things we can do.

There's plenty of science about increasing oxygen to the brain and lowering your heart rate. It's common sense really. We think more clearly and make better decisions when our body and mind are calmer. It's why we can't do Sudoku while we are at a HIIT class.

The real power though is in stillness. My coach¹⁴ said to me once: 'Slow down. Listen. Repeat. This is the essence of authenticity.' She was right.

What did she mean by authenticity? She meant listening to what is really going on, beneath the noise, the distractions, the busyness. It's only by removing these that we get the opportunity to listen to the powerful things that aren't being heard inside us. It's like trying to pick out a beautiful guitar riff whilst standing next to a motorway. When you move into a quiet field, it's much easier.

¹⁴ 'Wild Courage', by Elle Harrison. Her book shares and integrates ancient wisdom with the demands of modern life.

You can do this however you want. Meditation is hugely beneficial just as any other mindful activity. It can be simpler too: Clear some time in your diary. Ideally 24 hours, if not, then an afternoon. Even an hour can be beneficial. Go somewhere quiet and turn off or remove all distractions - phone, email, music, books, TV, other people. Just you and a notebook - that's it. See what happens.

You might find it incredibly frustrating or boring, but persist. You might find your mind wandering immediately to the various things you need to do, but persist. Give it time, and the fog will clear, even if only a little. Only through stillness do you start to listen to your true self. Underneath the conscious mind and lizard brain narratives, there're deeper programs at work, things not being heard.

Out of this space can come a revelation, an epiphany, a great idea, a recognition or... some calm and the opportunity to reset and remember why you're doing what you're doing. You have the rest of your life to rush around on autopilot (if you so wish). Take a break to listen to what you already know.

You won't be disappointed.

Chapter 10: Systems, not symptoms.

Have you ever done that thing where you spend time talking about someone you don't like, and articulating all the awful things about them? Like a political leader or a celebrity? I have.

Sometimes we do it with entire groups, like the people of a particular nation, and sometimes we do it with individual people we know. Even friends.

It's easy to look at a person and spend time dissecting their flaws. It can even feel rewarding, like a good scratch of an itch.

Setting aside the fact that we all have flaws (and are usually blind to our own), focussing on the person gets us nowhere. It's better to focus on why that person is the way they are, and why we dislike it.

All of us are the result of systems. Few of us like to think that - it's nicer to believe that we all operate with free will and everything we do is conscious, deliberate action.

In reality, what we do is the result of the family we came from, the school we went to, the city and country we grew up in, the places we've worked

and so on. Each of these contexts has a culture and they fundamentally shape who we are.

The greedy banker we despise wasn't born with a desire for wealth, he developed those values because of the systems he passed through. The politician we find repulsive was shaped by the culture of the country he grew up in. The coworker we find aggressive and rude at some point learned those behaviours as a way to succeed - or survive.

Focussing on the person is like playing whack-a-mole. If we could make them disappear, the system would simply develop another one. And many more like them.

The system is where the real change is.

By focussing on the system, we might actually make a difference. At the very least, we'll understand the object of our negativity a lot better and we'll probably learn something about ourselves too.

And what about yourself? Do you know what systems have shaped you and how? It might be better to understand the systems you're part of instead of focussing on your symptoms.

If we want to make a positive change, it means choosing better systems that will lead to changing who we are.

Chapter 11: Willpower is overrated.

We have an abundance of advice telling us, in different ways, that to make change in our lives, we need to beat resistance, find perseverance and persist for the long term. This is not bad advice.

The problem with this advice though is that it assumes that making change is all about effort in one direction: us versus the thing we're trying to conquer.

The process of change is subtler than that. When asked for one of the best ways to effect change, Daniel Kahneman¹⁵ referred to the often overlooked aspect of removing barriers. He was talking of Kurt Lewin - a social psychologist - and his work, Force Field Analysis¹⁶. The principle is simple: all organisations and people are subject to driving and restraining forces. For change to happen, there needs to be an imbalance between these forces. We can increase the driving force or decrease the restraining force.

So if we're pushing a boulder along the floor, we could push harder or ask someone to help. That would increase the driving force. But we could also

¹⁵ Daniel Kahneman is a Nobel prize winning psychologist, known for his groundbreaking work on behavioural economics.

¹⁶ 'Field Theory in Social Science', by Kurt Lewin

sweep the floor of any small rocks or debris, or smooth out some of the bumps on the boulder to make it roll more smoothly.

Sounds simple right? Yet most of the messaging we receive about making personal change focuses on the driving force - increasing our own effort. We can also look at what stops us and work on removing or lessening the restraining forces.

Whether it's our career, our relationship, our diet or our fitness - there are things we can do and there are things that are stopping us from doing them.

Focussing on the latter will make our efforts a lot more effective.

Chapter 12: Change your environment to change your life

Taken in isolation, this line overlooks the crucial role of the immediate environment in making individual change.

There's a lot of great thinking around on creating powerful and lasting habits for change. One of the common principles in forming good habits is to remove barriers.

Take a simple example. If you want to make sure you go for a run tomorrow morning, one of the things you can do is lay out your running gear the night before. Arrange it in a way that will take you more energy to ignore it, rather than put it on.

If you think of the mental and emotional energy that you'll need to dig out your running trainers from the back of the wardrobe when it's dark and cold outside, you will see that the routine above is in stark contrast. It removes the inherent hurdles to not go for a run. In other words, a simple change of environment can be a huge change enabler.

Adjusting the physical environment to be a change enabler is similar to the Poka Yoke principle in lean manufacturing. Poka-yoke translates as 'mistake-proofing' and was developed to prevent errors not just in

manufacturing but also in consumer usage of products. For instance, if we want to increase safety by preventing someone from driving without their headlights on, we build in automatic sensors as standard.

The principle of tweaking our physical environment to influence change, applies to many personal habits. Want to drink more water? Carry a water bottle with you at all times. Want to eat healthier at home? Remove all junk food from your house. Want to read more? Carry a book with you wherever you go.

It's about removing distractions and obstacles that are bad for us and adding the things that make good habits and behaviour easy.

Chapter 13: We're different from other animals

We are the dominant species on the planet. No doubt about it. One reason why is our ability to learn. More specifically, we have an astonishing capability to choose our own path of development. Or at least have a huge diversity of options in the skills we acquire.

No other species on the planet has this level of consciousness. All other species follow set patterns of learning related to food, survival, reproduction and, in some cases, play.

These preferences can change over time but only in timescales of evolution. A cow does not, halfway through its life, decide it would like to spend a little less time chewing cud and instead learn about the species of wild flowers in the next field. This is not to say the cow isn't conscious, but that its cognition doesn't allow for diversity of learning.

We humans are not bound by context. We can choose to learn within our current context or environment, or a completely different one altogether. We have an ability to communicate, share information and process it. We have an ability to imagine.

An estate agent in Wales can choose to learn about mingei, an ancient Japanese folk craft, even though he has not been to Asia. A Texan oil field worker can become interested in cricket despite living in a country where cricket is virtually unheard of. The daughter of a farmer in Malawi can become interested in mobile technology and coding despite not being exposed to a high-tech culture.

We can be limited by exposure and access to these contexts, but not by our cognitive ability to learn once we are in a given context. We can imagine, from just a single line in a book or a song, what another field of learning might be like.

Meanwhile, a polar bear does not wonder what it is like to play piano. A labrador does not take interest in Greek philosophy. Even chimpanzees, the species most similar to us, do not suddenly decide to learn snowboarding.

The only exceptions to this are where we train other animals in specific skills (chimps probably could snowboard with enough training and incentives). This only serves as another reminder of the power and diversity of our cognitive function.

Our ability to not only learn continuously, but with a vast array of choice and possibilities, is a phenomenal gift that we hold. We are all blessed with

a superpower. A superpower so complex that the smartest AI researchers may never replicate it.

What we choose to do with this superpower is our purpose, our luxury and our obligation.

Chapter 14: When we're in a hole

'The West Wing' was a drama series about a US President and his staff. Beyond the drama, it's a story of people with purpose, working as a team.

There's a storyline involving the Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry¹⁷. Leo's deputy is in trouble and is struggling with his mental health. After a critical meeting, he finds Leo waiting outside. Surprised, he asks Leo what he was doing there. Leo tells a story that goes something like this:

There's a guy who falls down a hole while walking. The walls are so steep, he can't get out.

A doctor walks past and the guy shouts, "Hey you. I'm stuck, can you help me?" The doctor writes a prescription and drops it in the hole.

A few minutes later, a priest walks past. The guy shouts, "Hey Father, can you help me out?" The priest writes a prayer and drops it down the hole.

¹⁷ It's a Christmas episode called 'Noël', first televised in 2000.

Then a friend walks past and the guy shouts, "Hey Joe, can you help me out?" And the friend jumps into the hole. The guy says, "Are you crazy? Now we're both stuck down here!"

And the friend says "Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out."

Chapter 15: Staring at billboards.

Imagine a billboard on a street that you see everyday. Maybe outside your home or where you work. Imagine that, several times a day, people stop what they're doing, rush out of their buildings and stare at this billboard. Hordes of people staring at this billboard.

They do this five, ten or even twenty times everyday. They might be waiting for a lift. They might be having lunch. They might be in a meeting. They might be talking to friends or eating dinner with their family. Whatever they're doing, they suddenly stop to rush outside and stare at this billboard. In total, they spend over two hours a day staring at this billboard¹⁸.

All those people are interrupting what they're doing to come and stare at this space. As a brand, how much would you pay to advertise on that billboard? A lot of money.

This billboard sounds like a figment of imagination, doesn't it?

It's real though.

¹⁸ Research by Statista showed that the average time spent on social media in 2019 in the US was 2 hours 3 minutes per day. The global average is 2 hours and 24 minutes.

It's social media.

Chapter 16: Changing the script

It's lovely to believe we all make our own decisions. We consciously consider options and make the best choice. Untainted and in isolation.

It's quite challenging to believe that our decisions come from places beyond our control. But they do.

Most of our beliefs were formed at an early age, through the environments we were in: families, friends, teachers. We learn what is good or bad, what is safe, what gets rewarded and a million other beliefs about how to act and be in the world¹⁹.

Imagine two identical children. One is taught that eating lots of ice-cream is great because you need to enjoy the things that make you happy. The other is taught that eating ice-cream is bad because you need to look after your health and enjoy sweets as treats. Those two children will likely form very different beliefs that will inform decisions for the rest of their lives.

¹⁹ 'Free Will', by Sam Harris

This continues beyond childhood. As we head into adolescence, increasingly our friends and immediate environment shape our beliefs. Then places like universities and colleges. And then workplaces.

They all influence our beliefs by defining what the norm is, what is safe, what is right.

If we adjust to these norms, we'll thrive. If we stray outside, it feels alien and unsafe. And so our world becomes a fairly narrow set of norms that we unthinkingly live in.

Our decisions aren't really ours.

Knowing that our decisions are based on beliefs formed many years ago can feel uncomfortable. But actually it neither condemns us, nor does it let us off the hook to do what we want.

Instead it empowers us to explore and challenge what those beliefs are and whether they still serve us.

When we're making a decision, even a minor one, if we examine it we'll find it traces back to a belief formed a long time ago.

We can challenge whether this is a belief we want to hold on to. Or we can change the script.

Chapter 17: Rebranding the mid-life crisis

What does the phrase 'mid-life crisis' mean to you?

Perhaps it is a story that goes something like this:

There's a happy or successful man or woman, somewhere between 40 and 60 years old. He has a great career or at least a solid job, has a nice home and a stable family life. Maybe kids, maybe not. Everything seems good. And then suddenly he does something crazy. He has an affair, buys an extravagant sports car or ditch his career and takes up carpentry instead. Switch the pronouns around if you'd like, nothing changes.

The phrase 'mid-life crisis' is loaded with negative connotations. For a start, it has the word 'crisis' in it. That's a pejorative term, indicating someone who appears to be imploding or melting down. They're damaging themselves and the people around them.

Sometimes, this is true. But more often, it's not. More often, the mid-life 'crisis' is a moment of difficult yet positive change.

And whether that period has negative or positive consequences, I believe it always stems from a single question that people are asking themselves.

"Is this it?"

We reach a point where we begin to wonder whether this is all that our lives have to offer. It's a question that might lie almost silent for a while, but eventually becomes a roaring voice.

This isn't true for everyone of course. Many people address this question quite early in life and set themselves on a course that creates a life that never causes them to ask the question again.

Others never need to ask themselves that question at all, carrying a level of authenticity and assuredness from childhood that means their purpose is always true. We've all met people like this, friends who have always seemed to operate at a higher level than the rest of us.

And then there are some people who hear the question regularly but never confront it, instead burying it and living lives of quiet desperation, a diminished version of their possible selves.

The rest of us must answer this question. If there is such a thing as a meaning to life, it surely involves each of us understanding who we really are and bringing that into the world.

I don't think the 'mid-life crisis' has anything to do with age or with a crisis. It is instead the point at which we begin to ask why we're doing what we're doing, and have the resources to answer the question. We begin to examine the unconscious decisions we made long ago that set us on our current path.

Enough life experience & wisdom + Enough distance from the unconscious choices = reflection + inflection

Our 'crisis' is actually an inflection point. We consciously examine our trajectory and decide whether it still serves us. Or whether we'd like to make an adjustment.

We wake up and begin making choices with awareness.

Either that, or we buy a Ferrari.

Chapter 18: Find your tiny tribe

There are an astonishing number of people in the world who want to tell us that they don't like what we're doing. Or they're not interested. Or they don't think it's any good.

That's ok. It's to be expected, welcomed even.

If we write a book that sells a million copies, that will comfortably place it as a worldwide bestseller in any given year. Yet 99.8% of the world will not have read it.

When we start anything, there will be more people telling us not to or that we're doing it wrong than telling us we're doing it right. That doesn't mean their advice isn't valuable.

The question is, what sort of dent do we want to make in the universe?

We live in a world where scale is conflated with success and influence. But making change, making a difference, doesn't need millions of followers.

Kevin Kelly described the principle of '1000 True Fans'²⁰. His point was simple. If we've 1,000 people who believe in what we're doing, we've cracked it - a singer who has 1,000 true fans who will always buy her work, will never be poor.

But we can shrink it further. Imagine a company founder who builds an organisation of 50 people who believe in the mission. What about a team leader who has 5 people who believe in her and her values? That's powerful.

When people tell you they don't believe in what you're doing, thank them. They've either given you some useful feedback or told you it's not for them. That's one less person to convince.

Onwards.

²⁰ Kevin Kelly first published this as an essay in 2008 and then updated it in a blog post in 2012, simply called '1,000 True Fans'.

Chapter 19: The stories you tell yourself matter

All great brands and companies have a story. They're usually aspirational, polished stories of triumph over adversity. A founder mythology that has been run through a PR machine and had some bullshit sprinkled on top.

From Steve Jobs to Donald Trump, from brands like Coca-Cola to Hugo Boss, the true story is often much murkier, dirtier and unpalatable in the current day. The myth becomes their story though — because that works better for them.

It makes perfect sense. Why would an organisation tell a story about themselves that doesn't paint them in the best light?

Why would you choose a narrative that doesn't serve you?

Many of us do exactly that though. We tell ourselves we can't do certain things, we must do other things, and label ourselves in ways that aren't helpful.

Did you just read that and think, "That's not me!". It's most of us — even when our narrative seems positive and empowering. I'll bet you know someone who considers themselves a hard, tough person at work. Sounds

great for them. Is it great for their coworkers though? Is it great in the long run?

We're basically made of stories.

I once heard Guy Garvey talk about his grandad - Garvey was close to him as a child. He remembered sitting at his feet, listening to his stories about the war and his youth. Sometimes, his grandad would have a coughing fit halfway through a story. When he stopped coughing, he'd tell them a completely different story. "At the end of it all" he reflected, "we're just a collection of stories that all merge together."

This is an anecdote about memories as much as stories. I walked away from that with the idea that living in a way that creates great memories or stories sounds pretty healthy. We are what we do, and we become a collection of what we've done.

How we frame our own stories can transform how we view ourselves.

Whether we're afflicted by self-limiting beliefs and stories about ourselves, or have chosen narratives that we believe are empowering but are actually damaging, changing our personal narrative can be transformational.

Have you heard the story about a man and a monument? It is a telling comment about mindsets.

A man was walking through a city when he saw a new building being erected. He recognised some religious symbols on the masonry. He saw a group of bricklayers and walked over to ask them what they were doing.

The first builder said, "I'm laying these bricks here to make a wall." Our man walked over to the second builder and asked him what he was doing. "I'm laying these bricks to make this wall go up very high." He went to the third builder and asked him the same question. The builder looked up, smiled and said, "I'm helping to build a magnificent cathedral. It will stand here for thousands of years. Millions will come to admire its beauty. My children will see it, and my grandchildren, and their grandchildren. Its majesty will bring joy to all those who visit it."

What stories do we tell ourselves about our past, present and our future?

Most of us aren't Zen masters so we can't fully let go of our powerful inner ego - but we can at least let go of stories that don't serve us and replace them with ones that do. After all, you wouldn't choose to see a movie that you know you won't enjoy, so why pick a story for your life that you know you don't like?

Whatever you think, question it. Whether you think you're amazing or awful, checking yourself against your own narrative is a powerful practice. You might find what you tell yourself doesn't match what you do or who you are. You might find it doesn't serve you or that it only serves you.

Mark Manson²¹ boiled it down to this: there are many possible interpretations of past events. Pick the interpretation that best serves you in growing. Believe not what's true, but what's helpful.

²¹ The original article he wrote on this is no longer available online but may well be in his first book.

Chapter 20: The Springsteen equation

Bruce Springsteen has recorded 19 studio albums and sold over 135 million records worldwide. One of his albums ('Born In The USA') is 15x Platinum in the US, meaning it has sold over 15 million copies there.

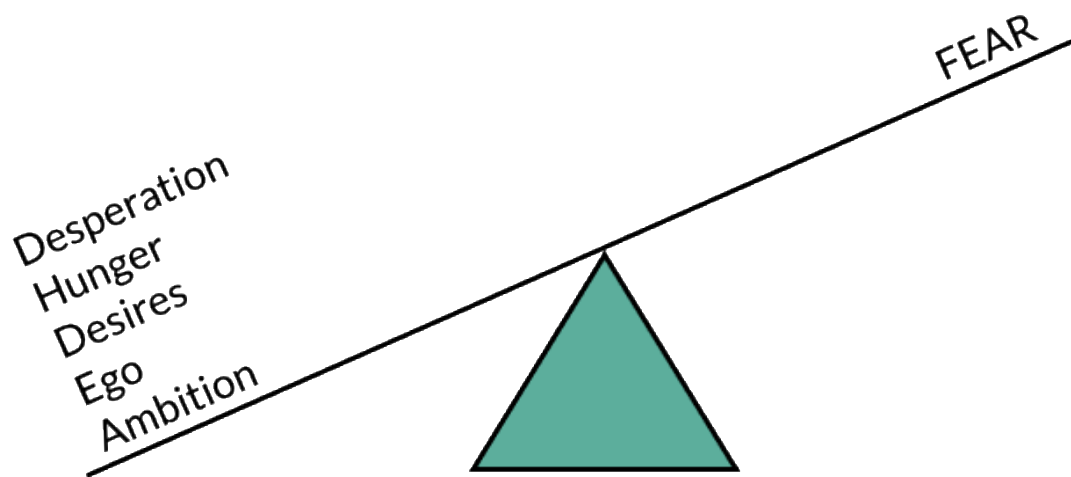
It wasn't always this way. His early family life was troubled, a difficult relationship with his father who struggled with mental illness and alcohol addiction. Money was scarce and his mother borrowed money to buy him one of his first guitars. The US in the 1970s was struggling with recession, unemployment and the Vietnam war - his home state of New Jersey was particularly hard hit.

As a perfectionist, Springsteen was obsessed with his work. And he struggled with his early work. The people he worked with experienced his anger and frustration. He didn't want to release work that he felt wasn't as good as it could be. He wanted it to be his best.

I heard an interview with Springsteen a few years ago. Talking about his early years and struggles for success, he said this: "Your desperation, hunger, desires, ego and ambition have to be greater than your fear of complete humiliation."

It's a simple but powerful equation. You can work either side of it, reducing fear or outweighing it.

That's what it takes.



Chapter 21: Invisible change

Exponential growth is the promised land. The bigger we get, the faster we grow. We become unstoppable.

It's often used to discuss the importance of innovation and experimentation in organisations.

Imagine a line going up from left to right. If we carry on as normal, that line is business growth. Let's call it line 1.

Now, imagine another line - line 2 - that starts at the same place but is slightly steeper so ends up higher. This represents incremental growth. This is basically higher growth due to some fairly simple changes: improving efficiency, reducing costs, investing in better technology.

Then there's a third line. This dips below the other two lines. It might even go below the starting point, taking growth to a negative. It might go round in circles for a bit. But eventually, this line starts to climb up and up, ever faster, eventually climbing way above the other two lines.

This third line is exponential growth and the thinking behind it is simple: to achieve extraordinary growth, we must first be willing to invest, experiment and possibly fail for a while.

The greatest innovations in history usually start out this way - below the line, out of sight, costing time and money, and often failing before, BOOM. They start to grow exponentially and when they finally become visible, it seems like they're an overnight success.

Apple started this way. And Facebook. And Google. And so on.

The same model applies for our growth and learning as individuals.

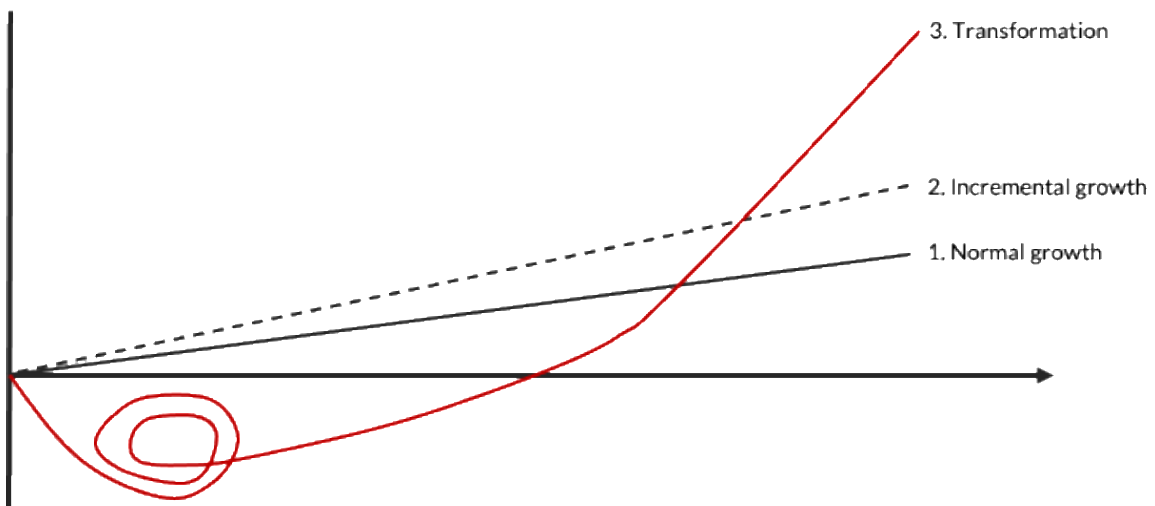
We often spend our time focussing above-the-line: better time management, improving email habits, more focussed meeting management and communication.

These definitely incrementally improve our work. And we focus on them because they're visible and the impact feels immediate.

But real growth and change happens slowly at first and out of sight. It requires effort and investment that is below-the-line but pays off over the long term.

It's personal change and growth that's invisible - until suddenly it isn't. It's exponential.

Can you invest in below-the-line?



Chapter 22: What do they need?

“What do you need now?”

There are at least two scenarios we can imagine this question being asked in.

The first scenario: a parent or teacher, at the end of their tether, being asked for something by a child for the tenth time. The question is irrelevant in this situation. It’s an expression of frustration and irritation.

The second scenario: imagine a leader, observing her team, noticing what’s happening in that moment. The energy, the mood, the quality of the work. She’s asking herself “What do you need now?” She might even ask her team directly.

The second scenario is about connecting with other people. It’s kinder, genuine and it’s geared towards action.

Great leaders dance in the moment constantly, asking themselves questions like this and responding to the answers they hear.

Chapter 23: We're all addicts.

Imagine yourself as an alcoholic trying to stay sober. Quite likely a day passes like this.

You wake up thinking about alcohol.

In the shower, you're worrying about alcohol. While you're eating breakfast too.

You leave the house to go to work and are surrounded by alcohol advertising, the people on the bus, the train are all carrying alcohol..

Everyone in the office is enjoying alcohol, the emails you receive are all about alcohol.

To take a break, you scroll through your social media to see thousands of people surrounded by alcohol. They seem to be having an amazing time.

You come home and talk about alcohol with your partner over dinner, and then you both turn on the TV to watch more people enjoying alcohol.

Finally, you go to bed as you started, worrying about alcohol.

Replace alcohol with money, status and possessions and you can see why so many people end up in a place that makes them unhappy.

This is why it can feel hard to make change.

It starts with recognising the forces nudging us (sometimes shoving us) in certain directions.

Chapter 24: Talking to strangers

I once met an angel on my way to Heathrow. I was taking the underground.

The carriage was empty apart from the two of us. I was reading a book. But my mind was on a venture I was working on. Should I commit or not, was it worth the risk, did I know what I was doing.

"Great book, that one," he said in a heavy Irish accent. I looked left and saw him casually munching on a chocolate bar and smiling.

We started to chat. He told me how he'd trained as a pilot, started an aviation venture in California, and was now spinning up a couple of apps whilst working as a project manager in London. He was on the way home for the weekend of surfing on the west coast of Ireland.

I told him what was on my mind. He nodded, encouragingly. "Live free, give stuff a go I say. If it goes wrong - f*ck it, at least you tried. You can carry on!"

With that, he grabbed his bag and hopped off at the terminal before mine.

It was exactly what I needed to hear. It was like he'd been sent to tell me.

Sometimes a stranger appears in your life at just the right moment.

Lesson? Pay attention - someone out there might be trying to tell you something.

Chapter 25: Perfection: the enemy of progress

"I'm a perfectionist." This is something that people often list as a weakness because they secretly see it as a strength. It's a way of signalling that we're obsessed about high standards although we know that can be hard for the less-committed people around us. It is a line that plays well in job interviews (confession: I've used that line in the past).

And who wouldn't want perfect? Perfect is by definition flawless, the highest quality, the best. Everyone wants that right? Perfection is the pinnacle of quality. Anything less would be inferior.

The truth is, being a consistent perfectionist actually is a big weakness. Although we might produce high-quality work, we're almost certainly slowing down the process, constraining output and wasting effort.

The cult of perfect

I have to hold my hands up. I've been guilty of demanding perfection in things like presentations and emails because I'm very conscious of messaging, language and aesthetics. It's arguable whether this level of quality is always necessary and people who have worked with me would attest to how infuriating it can be to have me tweaking language and changing diagrams. Is it always wrong? No. Is it sometimes wrong? Yes.

Modern organisations often demand perfection (or at least high quality) from individuals in a broad range of areas rather than a few. This might seem like a great way to build an organisation of highly skilled generalists but it's the opposite — generalists are good in a broad range of areas but rarely excellent at any.

The striving for perfection across the board seems like a cultural trait worth cultivating, even though it's probably an unrealistic standard and can dilute focus. This also applies at the organisational level — Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, knew this when he took his company out of any category where they weren't in the first or second place.

More recently, the era of mass startups has been fuelled in part by lower barriers to entry and the development of processes and thinking about how to have laser focus on what really matters.

Yet the MVP concept popularised by Lean Startup²², is now very well-known but rarely properly adopted in larger organisations. Try turning in a few hand-drawn diagrams or bullet points to summarise an idea to your boss and imagine what the response would be. Part of this is due to the

²² 'The Lean Startup', by Eric Ries

perception of quality — if it's presented in a nice slide, we tend to think the content is better regardless of whether that's true.

Another part is the logistics of how decisions are made in large organisations. Managers often want to receive and share things by email. And once things are shared electronically, we lose control of who's seeing it — so a picture of our Post-It note doodle for a new product probably isn't going to cut the mustard if it lands in the inbox of the COO.

Perfection, high-quality and good enough

The counter-argument to perfection is quite simple. Sometimes we need things to be perfect or as good as they can be. Sometimes you need things to be 'high-quality' — not perfect but very good. And sometimes you need things to just be 'good enough' — the minimum standard required to allow you to progress.

What most organisations (and by implication people) overlook is the 'good enough' category. Good enough seems like a compromise, an acceptance of lower standards. We fear that it encourages a culture of sloppiness and shortcuts. If we allow a few things to be just good enough, who knows where we'll end up in terms of quality across your business?

Why perfection vs. good enough matters

Science around decision making shows that our daily capacity to make decisions degrades in relation to volume. 'Decision fatigue' occurs after a certain point, so the more decisions we make in a day, the worse they tend to be. It's been much lampooned but this is why Steve Jobs always wore the same black turtle-neck sweater and jeans, and Mark Zuckerberg wears the same grey t-shirt every day — it's one less decision to make. Barack Obama had the same approach to the suits he wore and the meals he ate whilst he was President.

Like decision-making, our capacity to perfect things is also limited. If we try to perfect everything we do in a day, we'll get less done because two critical things are finite in every environment: time and resources. In practice, this means we need to constantly triage what needs to be perfect, what needs to be high quality and what needs to be good enough.

It's particularly important in high growth and high-change environments where progress in the form of testing and iteration are critical for learning. It's even more important at the individual level where aiming for perfection from the start will stop us from ever launching that venture idea, writing that novel, starting that side hustle, painting that picture — or even drafting that LinkedIn article we keep meaning to write. Aiming for perfect can stop us ever getting started and slow down how quickly we finish.

Is perfection always bad?

In some fields, and activities, perfection is appropriate and essential. Implementing regulatory standards in a bank for instance, is not something we want to be slapdash about; it could have catastrophic consequences if done with a 'good enough' approach. Likewise, if I'm having heart surgery I want to have a surgeon who's committed to excellence rather than 'good enough.'

But in both these cases, once we break down the top-level goal into activities, perfection isn't necessarily needed in every area. If I've hired a team of regulatory consultants, I want to feel that they've pored over every detail of the regulations to create detailed requirements for how my organisation should respond because that's mission-critical. But should I care if their slides don't look nice or they're not very skilled at communications planning? If I want to perfect those things, I can augment the team with additional resources rather than pay expensive regulatory experts to do so.

And I want my heart surgeon to be completely rigorous about pre-op hygiene procedures and attention to detail when she's working on my clogged arteries. But should I care if her bedside manner is a little blunt or cold? That's a role to be perfected by the post-op ward staff, it's not a good

use of time to ask her to be great at that too. This is why we have multi-disciplinary teams.

"Do you know what's better than perfect? Done. Done is better than perfect." - James Victore

How to get past perfect

Whether we're leaders or junior members of an organisation, the only place this change can start is with us. That change isn't a commitment to lower quality, it's the cultivation of that skill of triaging and deciding where resources should be best spent whether that's businesses, projects, our teams' focus or our own workload.

There are some simple questions that can help with this, for every single thing that competes for time and resource:

1. Who is it for and will they care if it's not perfect? If we're just sharing some initial rough ideas with a colleague, do they need to be in a slide or can they be bullet points or scribbles?
2. Where are the standards most important: where should we apply our limited resources? If the plan for this year is to close three new clients, we probably need ten times that many leads so perfecting our sales funnel and focussing resources on the blockages is probably a good place to start.

3. Is this a process task or an output task? Is this something that just gets the product to the next stage or is it the delivery of the final output to the client?
4. What's most important right now: content or presentation? If we only have two business analysts available, we should get them to focus on producing what they're best at (analysis and thought-based content) rather than polishing outputs.
5. Is the incremental increase in quality worth the delay in delivery? If we spend an extra day on increasing the quality of those slides, is that worth the delay to delivery and 'frustration overhead' within our team? Is there something else of higher-value we could be focussing on?

The biggest challenge here is in applying real rigour and honesty in asking ourselves these questions. It can feel unthinkable to let something leave our desk when it's not perfect but the only way to get past this is to keep asking those questions. Eventually, the practice becomes second nature behaviour.

Chapter 26: Doing nothing is not the same as not making progress

Change can be elusive. It's common to expect change to produce tangible results, or worse still, to produce them immediately. This is the growth in our lives that we notice most — change that is upwards and outwards.

There's a feeling that if our progress isn't visible to others, then we're somehow failing or falling behind. We measure what can be seen externally, particularly in and by other people, as that is the easiest and, often, instinctive thing to do.

When we conflate change with visible progress, we put ourselves at risk of acting for the short-term, for the cosmetic and for the wrong reasons. We chip away at our own trust in doing things that might not produce results now, but are the things we feel represent a deeper purpose.

Although this idea of growth might be how we measure our lives, it's not, in reality, how they're lived. They're messier, less predictable, move in different directions and at different rates.

Change happens at different speeds and with results that play out in ways we might not even notice. We often assume that change, growth, and development can only happen if we are consciously creating it. And therefore, we must, always, be taking some conscious action to create change.

Yet change isn't always linear or observable. Sometimes it's hidden, silent, gestating. Even if we're looking for it we might not see it.

Consider your own life 10 years ago, compared to now. Is every single difference or change down to your own conscious intentions? Or are there aspects you couldn't have predicted, didn't plan for and yet have worked out for the best?

"There's work happening now — even if we're not actively pursuing it."

- Ingrid Fetell Lee

Genetic science shows that, at a molecular level²³, how we experience our environment can actually change how our genes express themselves. The implications of this are profound — whatever environment we are in, we will experience deep-rooted change whether we realise it or not.

²³ Bruce Lipton's pioneering work on cloned stem cells in 1971 changed the field of epigenetics, which (in simple terms) examines how genes are turned on and off.

And yet we often find ourselves in an environment that we wouldn't choose. Many of us are pushing, battling, fighting to create some visible, conscious growth. We're committing to personal projects, building new relationships, setting ourselves learning targets and goals, scheduling and juggling our time for these and wider personal commitments.

These are honourable and important pursuits. And yet, in the middle of all this, we probably aren't taking enough time to do the opposite — to do nothing, to reflect and to recognise that we are already changing, adapting and growing. We just don't know it.

Perhaps we can go easier on ourselves?

Reflecting on the modern inclination to avoid boredom, philosopher Alain de Botton suggested that the next time we find ourselves unoccupied, instead of rushing to find a distraction, we instead rest in that space and imagine ourselves preparing to give birth to some great idea or thought.

Chapter 27: Specialize in being a generalist

The pace of change in our world is phenomenal. Truly mind-boggling.

Here's a little thought experiment. Let's imagine we are in 1500. And now let's imagine being taken in a time machine, 100 years into the future from then, to the 16th century.

What was the difference between 1500 and 1600? Probably not that much. The world was being navigated by European explorers, Shakespeare was born, horses and boats were how humans travelled - we'd have adjusted pretty quickly.

Then if we had travelled from 1600 to 1700, we'd be seeing some new things, empires being formed and civil wars being fought. We'd have probably been a bit unsettled. We'd still have horses and boats though.

Then from 1700 to 1800. Our predominant feeling would have been of panic as we encountered new things. The Americas were being colonized and it was the age of revolutions, steam engines, pianos and composers. Horses were still on the streets though.

Then from 1800 to 1900. America would have had a Civil War and would have abolished slavery. Charles Darwin had published his theory of evolution. Steam trains and cars were now whizzing people around, whilst aspirin, cocaine, electricity and machine guns would have been invented.

And finally, let's imagine travelling from 1900 to 2000. Our brain would probably explode on arrival in shock over what has changed over the course of a century.

In the last 150 years or so, work began to be transformed by ideas like specialisation. Coupled with industrial innovation this led to production lines and machines that were able to replicate human activity at a lower cost and higher output.

Initially, this was for work driven by easily replicable physical activities — making steel, milling cotton, transporting people. Then, as technology rapidly improved with the dawn of the microchip age, automation began replacing people — the bulk of a car could be built or aided by machines and entire factory production lines could be mechanised.

Next up was the phase we're still in now — replacing knowledge work with advanced technology. Accounting, for instance, was a solid, secure profession 50 years ago. Like most knowledge work, it was based on an

asymmetry of knowledge: "I know a lot about this specific area and you don't, so you need to pay me for my expertise." Now, that advantage is being eroded.

For a small business, the idea of needing a full-time accountant is almost unthinkable, with an array of self-service tech platforms or flexible, tech-driven services based on low-cost or even free price points.

The same is true for a huge number of knowledge professions. Some are being entirely replaced while others are being disrupted. Some others are being augmented by advances in technology: lawyers, advertising agencies, personal trainers, surgeons, financial advisors, auditors. The list is extensive. Professions and jobs across the spectrum of work are being replaced or severely disrupted by automation.

Who thrives in a world that is changing rapidly? People with a multidisciplinary skill set, the ability to see things at a system level and the skill to solve complex problems: generalists.

Our current culture and education systems however push us towards specialisations. These work for a minority but are increasingly less relevant in the world we live in. We cherish specialists in a world where human specialism is rapidly diminishing.

Don't get me wrong. Specialists are still essential and valuable in a wide range of settings. If I have a heart attack, I'd like my treatment to come from a deeply qualified heart surgeon rather than a collection of design thinkers standing around a whiteboard, brainstorming how to save my life.

But the boundaries between technology, humans and the natural world are increasingly getting blurred. The challenges we face are becoming more complex. The generalists will take the lead in resolving those problems. A problem like climate change, one so complex that our minds can barely fathom it, will not be solved through expertise in one field.

I'll leave you with this thought. A child born today would leave university and enter the workplace in 2041. Have we any clue what the world will look like then?

Perhaps one thing we can say is that the skills that will enable a person to flourish are quite different from the ones most valued today. An ability to solve problems with a range of emotional and technical skills is likely to be one of the valued skills.

Chapter 28: Manage your filter bubble

If you were to search the term 'ninja' on Google, what would you expect to see? I had expected to find results relating to the centuries-old Japanese mercenaries, with a tradition of covert espionage and warfare that became part of Western pop culture in the 1960s*. Numerous books, video games and songs have been inspired by ninjas, not to mention an entire genre of films.

What we will actually find is that the first two pages of search results refer to an American professional gamer and YouTuber called 'Ninja'. No mention of these ancient warriors that he named himself after.

Google's algorithm is simply returning the most popular (and paid for) results, and yet it is also entirely misleading from a context perspective.

I agree though that this isn't the world's most pressing problem but it does demonstrate how the information we receive is filtered without our knowledge. Search engines, newspapers, social media, TV news or radio - how do we know we're getting information that is correct, balanced and in context?

We don't. We can't. Although hugely amplified by the internet and social media, this isn't a new problem. When newspapers were the primary source of current events, context and perspective were still dependent on the publication we were reading.

Perhaps the problem is not that we receive skewed information, it's that we do so passively. We scroll, flick, view and listen without interrogation. We don't strive for nuance, instead we accept the soundbite or social media post at face value.

Perfect balance and context is impossible. What we can choose is how our filter works.

If we define it in positive terms, a filter bubble is a way of absorbing information that enriches our life in the long term without harming others.

So we can choose to prioritise information that broadens and deepens our understanding of the world, and of ourselves.

Here are some thoughts on how we can do that:

1. Test assertions. When you see headlines and posts, take a minute to check what they're saying actually makes sense and is underpinned by logic.

2. Check your own facts. In your pocket you have a super computer that can provide data and statistics on pretty much everything, within a matter of seconds - individual power that is unprecedented in human history. There's no excuse not to do a little digging.

3. Zoom out. Increase your perspective by taking a longer and broader view. Almost every news event is the culmination of a story that is much bigger than we realise. The 9/11 attacks took most of the world by surprise but the forces behind them had been building for decades - or even centuries. The effects of it are still influencing events today.

4. Consider your sources. Free information isn't actually free, nor is it unbiased. At the very least, it is paid for by advertising which means algorithms that prioritise content that will get the most clicks or views. And you don't even know who paid to promote that content. Your eyeballs are the product. Even paid for information will have bias, particularly when it is privately owned.

5. Choose healthy information. If spending time filtering feels like too much effort, one thing we can do is choose content that helps us to grow, feel positive and deepen our understanding. We don't need to have the latest news on every atrocity or injustice in the world - we can instead point our focus to things that help us to move forwards.

All of this requires us to be active rather than passive. To remain passive, is to allow ourselves to be misinformed and undereducated.

"Those who will not govern themselves are condemned to find masters to govern over them." - Steven Pressfield

**(apparently due, in part, to the 1964 James Bond novel 'You Only Live Twice', which is set in Japan)*

Chapter 29: Where do you feel it?

Decision making is often linked to an inner emotional state that we may not be conscious of. Sometimes we might describe a 'feeling in my gut' for example, but most of the time our emotions guide us silently.

We usually assign a rational explanation for our thinking afterwards, so that it makes sense to us. Occasionally, with enough distance or perspective, we might recognise that we were actually making a decision based on emotion. "I was a bit caught up in the anger when I said no" or "I think I got carried away with the excitement when I said yes."

But before we describe an emotion, we've already felt it somewhere in the body. It manifests somewhere in the body before travelling into our brainstem and being processed by our cortex so that we can describe it.

Finnish researchers mapped where in the body we feel our emotions²⁴, noting that the results were consistent across cultures. For example, disgust is mainly felt in the throat area whereas anger is usually felt across the head, chest and arms. Love is felt throughout the head and torso whereas anxiety is typically felt in the centre of the chest.

²⁴ The original study was conducted in 2013 and has been published elsewhere with heatmap diagrams.

Developing a closer connection with what we feel and where we feel it is deeply instructive. We can notice how our body reacts to specific people or what we feel when we're considering a course of action. Do we recoil? Do we feel excited? Do we feel an inexplicable sense of fear?

This form of embodiment gives us access to a deeper set of instincts and wisdom. This doesn't come at the expense of analytical, cognitive thought, instead it augments it like an additional, powerful data source.

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