

1. The Refusal of the Call - Recognising the Signs Before Crisis

Matthew reflects on Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, noting that men at midlife often ignore warning signs until they become impossible to dismiss. His burnout in the investment world wasn't sudden - it was a gradual accumulation of ignored signals. COVID-19 forced him into a position of stillness that allowed introspection he'd been avoiding. The lesson: we often need external disruption to recognise internal misalignment. Men particularly struggle with acknowledging when something isn't working because we're conditioned not to talk about difficulties until they reach crisis point.

The pandemic served as Matthew's inflection point. When lockdowns eliminated his constant travel between Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, London, and the US, he initially viewed it as temporary. However, months of working from home revealed that much of his business travel was unnecessary. Virtual meetings proved equally effective. This realisation prompted a fundamental question: if he could achieve the same professional outcomes without sacrificing time with family, why had he been living that way?

The pandemic gave permission to question assumptions that had previously seemed unquestionable. A reflection I am sitting with is that Covid gave everyone permission to question assumptions, and many of us did, for a while. Have we given that permission away and if so, is it time to reclaim that permission?

2. Delayed Gratification vs. Present Living – The Acceleration Decision

Matthew and his wife had a traditional plan: work hard, save diligently, delay gratification, and eventually enjoy life later. COVID prompted them to ask: why wait? His wife, a women's rights policy advisor who could work remotely, was ready. The family had already discussed their ideal life - they simply chose to accelerate the timeline rather than continue sacrificing present moments for a theoretical future. This wasn't reckless - it was intentional recalibration of priorities based on what they truly valued.

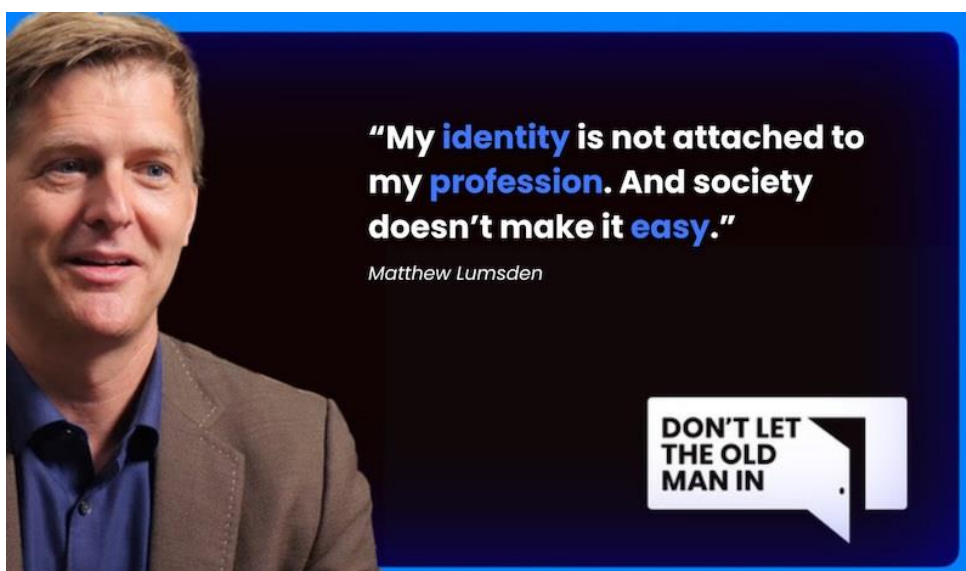
One of Matthew's most powerful insights involves distinguishing between actual needs and perceived trappings of success. Working at Vanguard provided status, security, international prestige, and material comfort. Yet when examined honestly, the family's actual needs were modest. The perceived trappings - impressive title, corporate status, constant travel - were less about genuine fulfillment and more about external validation. Letting go required an honest assessment of what truly mattered versus what society suggested should matter.

Matthew's investment philosophy directly influenced his life philosophy. Jack Bogle, Vanguard's founder, championed frugality and index investing - avoiding unnecessary costs and complexity. Matthew applied this to life: eliminate what doesn't serve you, focus resources on what genuinely matters, avoid lifestyle inflation. This wasn't about deprivation but about intentionality. Being "perpetually positively dissatisfied" means continuously improving without losing gratitude for what exists. The frugal approach creates financial margin that enables choice rather than obligation.

3. Family as North Star - The 6 O'Clock Dinner Commitment

When asked what his 75-year-old self would say about his "one wild and precious life" (referencing Mary Oliver's poetry), Matthew's answer was immediate: did you commit to 6 o'clock family dinners? This seemingly simple metric represents profound prioritisation. It's about being present for the daily rituals that create family culture - not just the occasional big moments. The memory he shared of his children and nephew laughing over pasta while singing "Manja la Pasta" captures what he values most:

seeking better approaches, remaining intellectually curious rather than settled.



4. Shibui - Elegant Simplicity Through Aging

The Japanese concept of Shibui - elegant simplicity that emerges through weathering and age - stands in stark contrast to Western culture's treatment of aging as degradation to be avoided. Matthew observed how Japanese culture honours eldership, seeing beauty and wisdom in aging rather than diminishment. As he ages, he finds himself naturally gravitating toward simplicity, stripping away the unnecessary, appreciating what remains. This isn't resignation but refinement - understanding what truly matters and having the confidence to let go of what doesn't. Which leads to my final insight....

5. Start with What You Don't Want - The Subtraction Strategy

When Matthew works with business owners, he begins by reviewing everything they're doing and asking what doesn't serve their core purpose. Organisations accumulate activities that drain resources without adding value, just as individuals accumulate commitments, relationships, and habits that don't serve their well-being. Matthew's final wisdom: if articulating what you want feels too overwhelming, start by clearly identifying what you don't want and eliminate those things. Subtraction is often easier than addition, and creates space for what genuinely matters to emerge.



Two Practical Experiments For Listeners

EXPERIMENT 1

THE COVID CLARITY EXERCISE - Forced Stillness Audit

Purpose

To recreate the reflective space that COVID-19 inadvertently provided Matthew, allowing you to examine which aspects of your current life serve genuine needs versus habitual patterns.

The Experiment

For one full week, conduct a "forced stillness audit" of your professional and personal commitments:

- **Document Everything:** Keep a detailed log of every meeting, call, email thread, travel, and commitment. Note not just what you did, but why you did it and whether the outcome justified the time/energy investment.
- **Virtual Alternative Test:** For any in-person meetings or travel during this week, ask: "Could this have been accomplished virtually?" If yes, note it. This reveals which aspects of your routine are based on actual necessity versus tradition or habit.
- **Energy vs. Outcome Assessment:** Rate each commitment on two scales (1-10): Energy required (time, mental load, preparation, travel, recovery) and Actual outcome/value delivered. Calculate the ratio. **Activities with high energy requirements and low value delivery are candidates for elimination or restructuring.**
- **The Acceleration Question:** At week's end, review your findings and ask Matthew's question: "If I could accelerate my ideal life timeline rather than delaying gratification, what would I start doing differently now?"
- **Make One Change:** Based on your audit, commit to eliminating or restructuring one high-energy, low-value pattern from your routine for the next month. Document the impact.

What This Teaches

Most people discover they're maintaining commitments based on outdated assumptions rather than current reality. The experiment reveals which sacrifices are genuine trade-offs versus unnecessary self-infliction.



EXPERIMENT 2

THE 6 O'CLOCK DINNER LITMUS TEST - Family Presence Audit

Purpose

To use Matthew's metric of "committing to 6 o'clock family dinner" as a proxy for examining whether your daily choices align with stated priorities around family and presence.

The Experiment

For 30 days, commit to one specific, recurring family ritual (it doesn't have to be dinner - choose what fits your circumstances) and track both compliance and quality:

- **Choose Your Ritual:** Select a daily family touchpoint that represents presence and connection: Family dinner at a set time, Morning breakfast together, Bedtime routine with children, Evening walk/conversation with partner, or Weekend morning ritual. The key is that it's daily (or near-daily), scheduled, and represents protected family time.
- **Track Compliance:** Use a simple calendar tracker. Green for days you honoured the commitment, fully present (not distracted by phone/work). Yellow for partial presence. Red for missed entirely. Aim for 80%+ green days.
- **Identify Obstacles:** When you mark yellow or red days, note specifically what prevented full presence: Work demands, Scheduled conflicts, Personal choice (gym, hobby, social), Technology distraction, or Mental preoccupation. This reveals your actual priorities versus stated ones.
- **The 75-Year-Old Self Question:** Each week, journal briefly: "If my 75-year-old self looked back on this week, would they feel I made the right trade-offs? What would they have wanted me to prioritise differently?"
- **Quality Assessment:** Beyond just showing up, rate the quality of presence during your ritual (1-10). Being physically present but mentally elsewhere teaches children that they're less important than whatever is distracting you. Aim to improve quality scores, not just compliance.

What This Teaches

This experiment confronts the gap between what we claim matters most and what our daily choices reveal actually matters most. Matthew's commitment to family dinners isn't about food - it's about demonstrating through consistent action that family connection is non-negotiable. The experiment forces honest reckoning with whether your life structure supports your stated priorities or undermines them.



Conclusion

Matthew Lumsden's journey from Vanguard executive to independent consultant and author represents a broader pattern available to anyone willing to question comfortable assumptions. His path wasn't about rejecting success but redefining it according to values he discovered through forced introspection.

The elegant simplicity he now embraces - Shibui - came not from having less ambition but from having clearer priorities. His frugal approach to both money and commitments creates freedom rather than constraint. His commitment to family rituals over corporate status demonstrates what maturity looks like: the confidence to choose meaning over validation.

For listeners navigating their own midlife transitions, Matthew's story offers both permission and practical framework: permission to question the path you're on even when external markers suggest success, and practical approaches for identifying what truly matters versus what you've been conditioned to pursue. Finally, his words at the end...."Try and find a way for the hard things to be easy because planning now will set you up for success in the future. If the question of why have you been put on this planet is too big, then start by clearly articulating or writing down what you don't like, and then get them out of your life. It's easier to stop doing certain things than to start new ones. Don't talk about it, just do it."



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