

What follows are six key reflections drawn from Peter's conversation - moments of insight that carry particular resonance for men navigating midlife transitions. Each is paired with a practical experiment to play with.

1. The Midlife Crisis is a Myth - But the Signal is Real

Peter opens with a provocation that is worth sitting with for a moment: the midlife crisis, as popularly imagined - the red sports car, the affair, the dramatic resignation - is largely a cultural fiction. But the underlying restlessness that gives rise to it? That is entirely real, and worth attending to with seriousness rather than dismissing it as a cliché. Peter's reframing is important and precise: midlife restlessness is not a breakdown. It is a signal. Something deeper is stirring, and the worst thing we can do is reach for a distraction before we have listened to what it is trying to say.

The psychologist James Hollis, whom I have mentioned before, in his essential work *The Middle Passage*, calls this the arrival of the second adulthood - a phase when the scaffolding of the first half of life begins to feel like a constraint rather than a support. The roles we built our identity around, the ambitions we organised our twenties and thirties around, the definition of success we inherited rather than chose - all of it comes up for review. Martin Seligman's foundational work in positive psychology echoes this from a different angle: **wellbeing in the second half of life is far less about achievement and acquisition, and far more about meaning, engagement, and the quality of our relationships**. The crisis, in other words, is not a symptom of failure. It is often a symptom of success that has outrun its own purpose.

Peter's own midlife has not been theoretical. He speaks with honesty about an ageing mother, a wife navigating a health challenge, a daughter working through a custody situation. This is the lived texture of midlife - not a tidy framework, but a season in which we are still learning while already being tested. What he brings, and what makes *Shift* such a useful companion, is the conviction that the way we interpret this season largely determines how we live it. Interpretation is not passive. It is a choice, and it is a practice.

We have heard versions of this theme in earlier DLTOMI episodes - from Ben Larke on the psychology of transition, and from Stephen Keys on the necessity of entering the dark forest rather than circling its edge. Peter adds something specific: the question to hold is not "why is this happening to me?" but "what is

this trying to tell me?" That small grammatical shift - from passive to curious - changes everything about how you move through what comes next.

2. Success Can Mask Misalignment - For a Very Long Time

Of the three core commitments Peter outlines at the opening of his book - lead your whole self well, tell yourself the truth, and practise radical acceptance - he is asked directly which one high-achieving men most commonly skip. His answer is immediate: telling yourself the truth. Not because high achievers are dishonest people. But because the very machinery of achievement creates a highly effective system for avoiding self-honesty. As Peter puts it, with the directness of someone who has lived this: **we can be exceptional at avoiding through productivity.**

If we just keep moving forward. If we just keep things afloat. If we just create one more thing.

The insidious part is that success makes this avoidance invisible. A man can be genuinely successful by every external metric - strong career, respected reputation, comfortable life - and simultaneously deeply misaligned with what actually matters to him. The gap widens slowly, quietly, over years. Until it doesn't. This is, in many respects, the defining internal dynamic of the men this podcast exists to serve. Pod has observed it in hundreds of executive coaching conversations: the higher the performer, the more refined their capacity to outrun the questions they most need to sit with.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development - the longest longitudinal study of men's wellbeing ever conducted, now spanning more than 80 years - is unambiguous on this point. Men who maintained a degree of honest inner reckoning with their own lives, even when that honesty was uncomfortable, consistently thrived over the long term. Men who avoided it did not. **George Vaillant**, who led the study for decades, described this quality as psychological maturity - and it has nothing to do with intelligence or ambition. **It has to do with the willingness to look.**

Peter frames self-honesty in the book as a doorway. Without it, you cannot move toward change because you cannot name what needs to change. You can't shift what you can't see. This is not a complicated insight. But in a culture that rewards output and confuses movement with progress, it is a radical one. A previous DLTOMI guest, Matthew Lumsted, put it differently but arrived at the same place: the most important conversation you will ever have is the one you are not yet having - with yourself.



Experiment

Choose one area of your life where you suspect there is a gap between what you are doing and what you actually want - in your work, your relationships, your sense of purpose. Ask yourself honestly, on a scale of zero to ten, how satisfied am I here? Then ask a second question: what is the one thing I have been avoiding looking at in this area? Write your answer. You do not need to share it with anyone. You only need to be honest with yourself - which, as Peter reminds us, is where all real change begins.

3. The Way You Think About Ageing Shapes the Way You Age

There is a piece of research in Peter's book that stops you cold the first time you read it. Becca Levy's longitudinal work at Yale University tracked participants over decades and found that people who held more positive perceptions of ageing lived, on average, 7.5 years longer than those who held negative ones. Not somewhat longer. **Seven and a half years**. The effect was independent of age, gender, socioeconomic status, and baseline health. What we believe about ageing - the story we carry, often unconsciously, about what getting older means - is a measurable health variable. It is not merely philosophical. It has consequences.

Peter frames this through the distinction between additive and subtractive ageing. A subtractive mindset says: it is all downhill from here. Every decade takes something away, and the trajectory is loss. An additive mindset says: this season adds something that the previous ones could not. Not in spite of what it costs, but alongside it.

Arthur Brooks, whose work Peter draws on directly, makes this argument brilliantly in *From Strength to Strength*: the second half of life is not a descent, it is a different kind of ascent. One that trades the processing speed and raw ambition of youth for wisdom, crystallised intelligence, and the capacity for depth that only comes with a fully lived life.

This connects, perhaps unexpectedly, to one of the founding impulses of this podcast. The name *Don't Let The Old Man In* is not simply a Toby Keith lyric inspired from a conversation he had with Clint Eastwood. It is a daily practice.

I set it up, in part, because I had watched too many people - my own parents' generation included - seem to age quickly once they stopped having a reason not to. The research backs this up. The stereotypes we hold about ageing, if



left unexamined, become self-fulfilling. They shrink our expectations, narrow our behaviour, and ultimately contract our experience of what is possible.

Peter's own Master's thesis explored paradoxical thinking about ageing - the capacity to hold simultaneously that ageing is beautiful and ageing is hard, without resolving the tension in either direction. He did not prove the hypothesis to his academic satisfaction. But the orientation it reflects - that complexity and nuance are more honest, and ultimately more useful, than either denial or despair - is woven through everything he has built. The question this reflection asks is simple: **what story are you carrying about what ageing means? And is it actually yours?**

4. Connection is Not a Nicety - It is a Non-Negotiable

Of all seven mindset shifts Peter outlines in Shift, the one that generates the most recognition - and the most discomfort - among men in midlife is the second: shifting to connection. Peter is candid about why. Women, he observes, tend to build connection into the fabric of their lives more naturally. It is more woven into their history, their social habits, and their sense of identity. Men, by contrast, tend to make their meaningful friends early - in school, on sports teams, in the early years of a career - and then, as the decades pass, allow those friendships to thin out through neglect and inertia. By midlife, many men have quietly arrived at a place where their wife or partner is not just their primary relationship, but effectively their only deep one.

A previous guest on this show described it perfectly: men in midlife often become wallflowers at their wives' social gatherings, hovering at the edge of someone else's community because they never built their own. Tim Hewson, who came on DLTOMI to talk about the Mongrel's Men movement, has built something extraordinary around the simple insight that men will talk when they walk - shoulder to shoulder, moving forward, not sitting face to face across a table. The walks started small. They are now significant. Peter's own enterprise, Shift Into Life, operates on a similar insight: give men a shared goal, a physical environment, and a structured but informal opportunity for reflection, and something opens up that sitting in a boardroom never will.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development - which I referenced in this conversation and which we have returned to in several episodes - is as clear as research ever gets: the quality of our relationships is the single greatest predictor of how well and how happily we age. Not wealth. Not status. Not fitness. Relationships. Robert Waldinger, who now leads the study,



summarises it in a single sentence: good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.

And yet men in midlife are, statistically, the loneliest demographic in Western societies. The gap between what the research says and how most men are actually living is one of the most important public health stories of our time.

Peter's counsel is not to feel ashamed of this gap, but to close it.

And the closing, he insists, does not require a grand gesture. It requires one intentional step. One coffee. One phone call you have been putting off.

One walk with someone you keep meaning to see.

Start small, start closer in than you think necessary. Then go again.



5. Stillness is Not the Opposite of Productivity - It is the Engine of It

The sixth of Peter's seven shifts - Shift to Stillness - is the one he identifies as sitting most uncomfortably with men whose identity has been built on doing, producing, and delivering. This is not a theoretical observation. It describes, with precision, the interior life of most of the men this podcast speaks to. For men who have spent decades confusing movement with progress, stillness is not just unfamiliar. It carries a faint moral taint. It feels, as Pod observes directly in this conversation, dangerously close to laziness. And laziness, for the kind of high-achieving, growth-oriented men who find their way to DLTOMI, is close to the worst thing you can be.

The irony, of course, is that the neuroscience does not support this framing at all. The Default Mode Network - the brain's resting state circuitry, which activates during periods of quiet, unfocused awareness - is not idle. It is integrating. It is processing experience, making connections, generating insight, and working on the problems we have not been able to crack while consciously staring at them. The best ideas, as Peter notes with a smile, tend to arrive in the shower. On the walk. In the quiet between tasks. Not because those environments are special, but because we are finally not filling them with noise.

The psychologist Anthony Storr, in his quietly important book *Solitude: A Return to the Self*, argues that the capacity for meaningful aloneness - not isolation, but intentional solitude - is one of the strongest markers of psychological maturity. It is the capacity to be with oneself without immediately reaching for distraction. Peter's own stillness practice is not elaborate: walking, journaling, building intentional quiet time into the daily routine. It is unglamorous. It is, in his own words, something he has to be very deliberate about, because his natural tendency runs toward agitation and mental activity. The practice is not temperament. It is a discipline chosen in service of something larger.

I made a point in this exchange that I want to flag specifically for the men listening: **reflection is not the absence of doing. It is a different type of doing.** It is the type of doing that makes all the other doing more purposeful, more directed, and ultimately more effective. The concern - I am not doing stuff and I should be doing stuff - is understandable. It is also, in the end, a story. And like all stories, it can be examined and revised. For men navigating major midlife transitions, the temptation to accelerate, to force resolution, to out-effort the complexity, is almost universal. The invitation from Peter - and from the research he draws on - is to resist that temptation long enough to actually think.



6. Packing Light - What You Leave Behind Matters As Much As What You Carry Forward

My favourite moment in this episode was reading aloud a poem from page 29 of Shift. The poem is called Packing Light. I want to give you the shape of it without reproducing it in full, because the experience of hearing it read is part of the point. It begins with the image of a man travelling through life with leather-strapped trunks, brass-cornered, each one bulging with trophies from younger days: ambition, opinion, a fondness for being right. He lugs them through his thirties. Weaves them into his forties. By 50, he begins to wonder whether he actually needs three variations of the same self. So he starts unpacking. Not all at once. Just a grudge here. A should or two there. An awkward memory kept under a sweater from the nineties. The poem ends with the image of a man carrying only a thermos of tea, a notebook, and both hands free.

Peter wrote it as part of Shift because he wanted to tackle the concept of letting go from a different angle than prose allows. He has always been, by his own description, a great storyteller - someone who has told himself fantastic stories over the course of his life about who he is and what he can and cannot do. Some of those stories were useful. Some of them ran long past their use-by date. The poem is, at one level, about the stories we carry that used to protect us and now simply weigh us down. The insecurity of our twenties that drove us to prove ourselves. The need for external validation that sustained us through our thirties. The identity tightly bound to a role that is no longer ours to play.

Carl Jung wrote extensively about this as the defining psychological task of the second half of life: not building more, but shedding what no longer belongs. Not acquiring new identity, but discovering what remains when the performance is set down. The developmental psychologist Robert Kegan described it as the movement from a socialised mind - one that derives its sense of self from external roles and expectations - toward a self-authoring mind, one that knows who it is independent of the validation of others. This is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing practice of honest discernment: what am I still carrying, and does it actually serve the person I am becoming?

What strikes me most about Peter's poem, and about this conversation as a whole, is that the lightness he describes is not emptiness. He is at pains to make this clear. It is not about blowing your life up, walking away from everything, or reinventing yourself from scratch. It is, as he says in the very last words of the episode, about moving closer into who you really are. The second half of life, on this reading, is less about addition and more about clarification. Less about building a new container and more about finally filling the one you have with something that actually matters. Stephen Keys, in an earlier episode, used the phrase simplicity lies on the other side of complexity. Peter Reek, in a poem written at 4am in a moment of unexpected creative flow, arrived at exactly the same place.



A note from Pod

I started reading Shift on a flight from Sydney to London. I read it three times before I landed. If that tells you anything, it should tell you this: Peter Reek is not writing for an audience. He is writing from experience - his own midlife, honestly examined. The seven shifts he outlines are not aspirational theory. They are practical invitations, grounded in the same positive psychology research he built his Master's degree around, and tested against his own life at every point. What I love most about this conversation, and about Peter's work, is what he said in the very last moments of our recording: it's not about recreating yourself. It's not about blowing things up. It's about stepping closer into who you really are. That, in a single sentence, is what Don't Let The Old Man In is for.



DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



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