

What follows are six key reflections drawn from Stephen's journey — moments of insight that carry particular resonance for men navigating midlife transitions. I have included two experiments to play with.

1. What Breaks Your Saunter?

Stephen borrows a phrase from an art professor at the National University of Singapore to describe the moment a career decision became clear: not through spreadsheet analysis, but through something ineffable that stopped him mid-stride. The professor's exercise — walk through an art gallery until something breaks your saunter — is really an exercise in attending to what matters before your rational mind talks you out of it.

We know from research by psychologist Jonathan Haidt that moral and emotional intuitions precede our reasoning, with rational thought often arriving after the fact to justify what we already feel. Stephen's decision to leave a Group CEO role heading for an IPO in favour of a regional leadership role that offered him the chance to build a community development foundation was, by conventional metrics, a demotion. And yet something in him knew.

This connects powerfully to work by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh in a book called *The Path*, which argues that the ancient Confucian practice of paying close attention to small emotional signals — the moments when something feels off or unexpectedly right — is far more reliable as moral guidance than grand philosophical reasoning. In our previous episodes, we've heard similar themes from guests like Matthew Lumsted and Craig Williams: that the decisions which ultimately shape a life rarely feel logical at the time.

The invitation here and from Stephen in our interview is to slow down enough to notice what breaks your saunter — not in an art gallery necessarily, but in your own life. What meetings, conversations, or activities leave you quietly energised, even when you can't explain why? What are you ignoring because it doesn't fit the narrative of who you're supposed to be?

Experiment

Here is a simple experiment and one I have tried myself many times as well as recommended to many people over time...

Over the next two weeks, keep a brief daily log — three sentences maximum. At the end of each day, note one moment that surprised you by how it made you feel (positively or negatively). Don't analyse it. After 14 days, review the log and look for patterns. What do they tell you about what actually matters to you, as opposed to what you think should matter?

2. The Persona We Carry vs. The Person We Are

Stephen speaks about recognising, in retrospect, that he had spent years carrying a professional persona — disciplined, driven, commercially focused — that was genuinely part of him, but not all of him. He describes this as outsourcing the other parts: the creativity, the connection, the desire for community. His wife managed relationships with his own parents; friendships became transactional; the interior life was deferred indefinitely.

Psychologist Dan McAdams calls this the **personal narrative** — the story we construct about who we are, which functions as both compass and cage. For men in midlife, Erik Erikson's framework of generativity versus stagnation is instructive here: the second half of life calls us toward contribution and integration, but that shift requires us first to acknowledge the parts of ourselves we've left at the door of the boardroom.

Brené Brown's research on wholehearted living arrives at a similar conclusion: the professional armour that helps us succeed in early career can become the very thing that prevents us from living fully in later life. Stephen's articulation of this is particularly honest: "I felt they were necessary — they were necessarily close to what it means to be successful in that role. But I measure success very, very differently now."

This is also a theme we explored in depth with Dr. Psychologist Ben Larke in an earlier episode of Don't Let The Old Man In — that what we suppress doesn't disappear, it simply accrues interest and demands repayment at a time not of our choosing.



3. Community as Core Value: From Transaction to Belonging

This is one of the most important reflection I have taken from Stephens conversation and that is the central importance of community in all our lives. I am recording this after spending the weekend on a farm in Kangaroo Valley at a music festival.....

Stephen's central insight from years of inner work — arriving through a corporate values exercise, tested by divorce, confirmed through volunteering and the IFS Foundation — is that community is not just something he values abstractly, but the organising principle of a life well lived. The irony was that he had been outsourcing the very thing he most needed.

A Sociologist called Robert Putnam's conducted a landmark study that he called "Bowling Alone", where he documented the dramatic decline of social capital in Western societies since the 1950s — the erosion of civic clubs, neighbourhood associations, religious communities, and informal networks that once gave people a sense of belonging and mutual obligation. He specifically said that Americans became increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and democratic structures, resulting in weakened civic engagement and community cohesion. His research demonstrated that loneliness and social disconnection are not merely personal misfortunes but structural features of modern individualism.

Stephen references a gentleman called Cormac Russell in this episode, who offers a compelling framework through his asset-based community development model: rather than asking **what's wrong with a community** and what it needs from outsiders, ask **what's already strong**, and how can outsiders serve as useful enablers of what's already there. This is precisely what the IFS Foundation practised in Sri Lanka — and it's equally applicable to the communities we inhabit in our own lives.

For men navigating midlife, the research is unambiguous: social connection is one of the most powerful predictors of healthy ageing, cognitive longevity, and resistance to depression. The Harvard Study of Adult Development — the longest-running study of human wellbeing in history — concluded after 80 years that the quality of our relationships is the single greatest determinant of how well and how happily we age. Not wealth. Not fame. Relationships.

In an upcoming episode I am talking with two guys on the circles they have set up, be it a music club or a book reading club. Sounds simple. Believe me, they are profound.



4. You Have Nothing — But You Still Have Something to Give

One of the most quietly powerful moments in this conversation is Stephen's reflection on a period when he was, as he puts it, on the bones of his arse — financially depleted after divorce, estranged to varying degrees from his sons, lonely in a way that the usual solutions couldn't fix. And yet, almost out of desperation, he began to volunteer. First a soup kitchen. Then Willing Hearts in Singapore. Then refereeing football matches. Then Kids Giving Back.

The insight that emerged — crystallised in a session at Kids Giving Back where a person with lived experience of homelessness told a room of children that giving someone eye contact and a genuine greeting costs nothing and means everything — is that dignity is always within our capacity to offer, regardless of our material circumstances.

Viktor Frankl wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* that the last of human freedoms is the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. That the act of giving — of being of service, however simply — is one of the most reliable routes to meaning available to us, particularly in the moments when we feel we have the least to offer.

This is also consistent with research by Lara Aknin and Elizabeth Dunn, whose cross-cultural studies on **prosocial spending** and giving demonstrate that the act of giving produces measurable boosts to wellbeing and life satisfaction — often exceeding the wellbeing benefits of receiving. They found a

- **Global Evidence of Happiness:** Analyzing survey data from 136 countries, they found a positive, consistent association between prosocial spending (donating to charity or buying gifts) and higher levels of subjective well-being.
- **Causality Across Cultures:** Experimental studies in both rich (Canada) and poor (Uganda, India) countries confirmed that spending money on others causes greater happiness than spending money on oneself.

In other words, giving benefits the giver at least as much as the recipient. Stephen's experience, in every context he describes, confirms this.



5. Slow Is Smooth, Smooth Is Fast

Stephen learns this lesson in the rice kitchen at Willing Hearts in Singapore, standing at 4:30am in a production line serving 8,000 meals a day, being tutted at by aunties when his rice isn't cooked properly because he rushed the process. The principle — borrowed from Formula One driver training and Navy SEAL culture — is that urgency without discipline produces chaos, and that the fastest route to an excellent outcome is often a deliberate, steady rhythm rather than frenetic effort.

He applies it immediately to his inner life: he is, by his own admission, someone who gets agitated easily. The rice kitchen became a meditation. Slow down. Find the rhythm. Trust the process. Don't let the noise — internal or external — make you rush in a way that undoes the work.

This connects directly to the neuroscience of performance under pressure. Research by Sian Beilock at the University of Chicago on choking — the phenomenon where skilled performers underperform under high-stakes conditions — consistently finds that the culprit is self-monitoring: the moment we start consciously attending to an automatic process, we disrupt it. The antidote is exactly what Stephen discovered in that rice kitchen: routinise the process, slow the rhythm, and trust the body.

For men in midlife who are navigating major transitions — career changes, relationship reconstructions, the care of ageing parents alongside raising adult children — the temptation is to accelerate, to force resolution, to out-effort the complexity. Stephen's counsel, earned in a Singapore kitchen at dawn, is to resist that temptation.



6. Simplicity Lies on the Other Side of Complexity

Stephen closes the conversation by borrowing a phrase — originally offered to him by me, as it turns out, — that quietly summarises the architecture of his entire journey: simplicity lies on the other side of complexity. You cannot bypass the dark forest. You have to enter it, lose your bearings, encounter what you've been avoiding, and trust that there is an other side.

This maps directly onto Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey — the monomyth that underlies virtually every great story ever told, from ancient mythology to modern cinema. The hero is called to adventure, refuses, accepts, descends into the underworld, faces trials, and returns transformed with gifts to share with their community. What Campbell emphasised — and what Hollywood routinely misses — is that the transformation only occurs because the hero endures the underworld, not in spite of it.

The poet Dante, whom Stephen references at the close of this episode, begins his great journey with exactly this premise: Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost. That dark forest is not a metaphor for failure. It is the necessary precondition for a larger life.

Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl, developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, and more recently philosopher Richard Rohr in his work *Falling Upward* all describe this same dynamic from different traditions: that the first half of life is about building a container — an identity, a career, a self — and the second half is about filling it with something that actually matters. The container must be built. But at some point, it must also be examined, questioned, and in some cases, broken open.

Stephen's counsel is not to romanticise the dark forest, but to resist the temptation to live perpetually on its edge, hoping to avoid entry. Own your mess. Face it. And trust — as he has earned the right to say — that a kind of simplicity waits on the other side.



Experiment

Identify one unresolved complexity in your life that you have been circling rather than entering — a relationship, a career decision, a conversation you've been deferring, a grief you haven't fully felt. You don't have to resolve it this month. But write it down honestly, in no more than three sentences. Then identify one small, concrete step you could take in the next week that moves you toward it rather than around it. Just one step. Then notice what it feels like to move toward something rather than away from it.



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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