

What follows are four key reflections drawn from my conversation with Merrick Watts — comedian, SAS Australia survivor, wine expert, entrepreneur, and one of the more honest men I've had the privilege of sitting across from. Merrick doesn't do polished or sanitised. He does real. I've included one experiment with each reflection for you to play with.

1. Your Purpose Is to Be, Not to Do

There is a moment early in my conversation with Merrick that I keep returning to. He describes sitting down before the SAS Australia selection course — not to train, not to strategise, but simply to accept himself. Everything. The chameleon quality. The polymath brain. The bits that don't fit a single neat narrative. He describes the experience as “super change” — a quiet revolution that preceded the very public one televised across the country. And then he says something I haven't been able to shake: “my purpose is to be, not to do.”

This cuts against almost everything we're taught as men navigating careers and identity. We are relentlessly schooled in doing — in achieving, in building, in becoming. Purpose, in the language of corporate workshops and LinkedIn posts, is almost always transactional. It's a mission statement. A deliverable. Merrick's insight arrives from a different direction entirely: that when you strip away the doing, when you let go of purpose as a fixed destination, what remains is the only thing you ever truly had to offer — yourself, as you actually are. Colin Farrell, whom Merrick and I reference in our conversation, arrived at the same place: that the actor who simply 'is' can play any character. That being is the prerequisite to doing well.

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan spent decades studying how adults grow, and his framework of 'subject-object' transformation maps this precisely: the shift from being driven by your roles and achievements (subject) to being able to hold them, examine them, and choose them (object) is one of the deepest transitions available to a human being. Many men arrive at midlife having never made it. They remain subject to their job title, their reputation, their former selves. Merrick — through the particular crucible of SAS selection, identity collapse, and deliberate reinvention — has made the move. He holds his roles lightly now. They don't hold him.

James Hollis, the Jungian analyst whose work keeps appearing as background reading in this podcast community, writes in 'Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life' that the great project of midlife is not to become something new but

to become more fully what you already are. That the false selves — the personas, the performances, the accommodations made to the expectations of others — eventually demand a reckoning. Merrick's reckoning came, as these things often do, through pressure and exposure. The SAS course didn't build him. It stripped away what wasn't him.

What Merrick is pointing toward resonates deeply with listeners of this show who are asking the same questions in quieter ways: the executive who no longer recognises himself in his own diary, the man who's done everything he was supposed to do and still feels like something is missing. The invitation is not to find a better doing. It's to locate yourself inside the doing you've already got.

Experiment: The Being Audit

Set aside 20 minutes this week, away from your phone and your to-do list. Take a blank piece of paper and write your answer to this question: "If I had no job title, no income, no reputation to maintain — who would I still be?"

Don't aim for a polished answer. Write whatever comes, including the uncomfortable bits. Then circle the words or qualities that feel most true — not most useful or most impressive. Most true. Keep that piece of paper somewhere visible for the next two weeks. Notice whether your daily choices align with what you've circled, or whether they serve something else entirely.



2. Identity Is Not Your Job Title

One of the threads I return to most often on *Don't Let The Old Man In* is the question of identity — specifically, what happens to a man's sense of self when the role that has defined him is no longer available. We've explored this with Craig Williams, who left the military. With Peter Reek, who wrote an entire book about the disorientation of midlife transition. With Stephen Keys, who spent years outsourcing his interior life to the demands of a corporate persona. Merrick Watts brings to this conversation something different: the experience of identity collapse in real time, narrated with the clarity of a man who has come out the other side.

After 20 years of national fame from being the famous co-host on breakfast and drive radio — a daily, high-stimulus, highly relational world — Merrick stepped away. The first year felt like liberation. The second year began to feel like something else. He describes lying in bed at eight in the morning while his wife drove the children to school, and recognising with sudden, uncomfortable clarity that he was watching himself slide. “This is how it starts,” he thought. Not with drama. With malaise. With the quiet disappearance of the pressure, he had always, it turned out, needed in order to feel like himself. The role had gone. The identity was still attached to it.

Dan McAdams, the Northwestern University psychologist who has spent a career studying life narratives, argues that the stories we construct about ourselves are not merely decorative — they are the architecture of identity itself. When a central chapter of that story ends abruptly, the narrative collapses. The man who was ‘the voice of drive radio’ or ‘the funniest man in Australian breakfast’ or ‘the one people turned on every morning’ finds himself, suddenly, without a role to play in his own story. Merrick's warning is pointed: “Do not allow your job to define your identity. Define your identity and define your job. They are two separate things.”

This is easier said than done, and Merrick doesn't pretend otherwise. He acknowledges having been “guilty of it” himself, and that “it really hurt”. But he also offers something more useful than diagnosis: the observation that the men who navigate these transitions best are the ones who had some sense of themselves — some thread of character, curiosity, or commitment — that existed independently of the role. For him, it was the stand-up comedian underneath the radio presenter. The wine passion beneath the microphone. The entrepreneur who always found a way to combine things that shouldn't go together. Those threads didn't disappear when the role did. He'd just stopped attending to them.

Merrick draws on the Japanese concept of *ikigai* — the intersection of what you love, what you're good at, what the world needs, and what you can be paid for — as a frame for thinking about this integration. His show ‘An Idiot's Guide to Wine’ is perhaps the most vivid expression of *ikigai* I've encountered across all



our conversations: comedy, expertise, education, and performance, folded together into something that didn't exist before he made it. He didn't find his identity. He built it, from the parts of himself he already knew.

3. The Clint Eastwood Effect: From Actor to Director

Midway through our conversation, Merrick introduces a concept he calls 'the Clint Eastwood Effect' — and he's quick to note, with characteristic honesty, that it's not a real thing and you shouldn't Google it. But it describes something profoundly real: the shift that becomes available to men in the second half of life, from performing in the scene to shaping how the scene is made. Eastwood spent years as one of Hollywood's most bankable actors. Then he became one of its most celebrated directors. The skills didn't disappear. The perspective changed. He moved from being directed to directing.

Merrick connects this explicitly to his own arc. Fame, he says, was important to him once. It no longer is. What matters now is legacy — and legacy, in his framing, is less about what you accumulate and more about what you set in motion. His wine comedy format is now licensed in ten countries. He watched someone else perform his material in Chicago and felt, simultaneously, a pang of envy and a deeper satisfaction: the satisfaction of having created something that travels without him. "Legacy is not a trophy," he says. "It's planting a tree you'll never sit under."

Arthur Brooks, in his book 'From Strength to Strength', draws on a body of research showing that the kind of intelligence that drives early career success — fluid intelligence, the ability to generate novel solutions fast — begins to decline in our forties. But crystallised intelligence — the accumulated wisdom of experience, pattern recognition across decades, the ability to see the whole board — continues to grow well into our seventies and eighties. The tragedy Brooks identifies is that most men don't make the transition. They cling to the actor role long after the director role becomes available. They double down on the very thing that is already fading, rather than stepping into the thing that is just beginning to ripen.

Erik Erikson called this the developmental tension of midlife generativity — the impulse to create something that will outlast you, to contribute to a story larger than your own. Men who fail to make this shift, Erikson argued, slip into stagnation: a kind of arrested performance, running the same material to smaller and smaller rooms. Merrick's refusal to follow his contemporaries onto TikTok — his active decision not to cling to the kind of visibility that defined his younger years — is, in Erikson's terms, a healthy expression of generativity. He is choosing to build something, not to maintain a profile.



What strikes me about this reflection is how quietly radical it is. We live in a culture that rewards visibility, reach, and personal brand above almost everything else. Merrick is making a different bet. That the ripple matters more than the wave. That the man who taught someone else to tell a joke in Chicago has done something more lasting than the man who filled a room with his own name. I think he's right. And I think a lot of the men listening to this podcast are quietly ready to make the same shift — if they can name it clearly enough to choose it.

4. Loss Is the Price We Pay for Love

There is a sequence in this conversation that stops me every time I listen back to it. Merrick talks about his father — the distance, the clashes of adolescence, the unlikely bond that formed through humour in his early twenties, and the relationship that became, in his words, one of the great ones of his life. He talks about making sure the last words he said to his father were 'I love you' — an act of deliberate intention, born from the awareness that his father found those words almost impossible to say. And then he talks about sitting bedside with his mother through five days of vigil as she died, refusing to be caught in transit again, riding it out because he had decided that this was the sort of man he wanted to be.

What Merrick offers to his son — and what he crystallised for me in a single sentence — is this: "loss is the price we pay for love. Accept the loss, and receive the love, but don't think you're going to get one without the other." He said it first when the boy's cat died. He said it again when his mother died. It is, in my view, one of the most complete and usable pieces of wisdom in this entire conversation. Not because it makes grief easier. Because it names grief honestly, without the usual flinching.

The research on grief and men is not encouraging reading. Men are significantly less likely than women to seek support following bereavement, significantly more likely to suppress or defer the experience, and significantly more vulnerable to what researchers call 'complicated grief' — a prolonged, unresolved state that carries serious consequences for physical and mental health. A study published in the journal 'Psychological Medicine' found that bereaved men showed elevated risk of mortality in the year following a spouse's death, a phenomenon sometimes called the 'widowhood effect', but observable across all close relationships. We are, as a gender, poorly equipped for the loss that love inevitably carries.



Victor Frankl, who appears often across our conversations on this podcast, wrote in 'Man's Search for Meaning' that suffering — when it cannot be avoided — becomes the opportunity for a uniquely human dignity: the choice of how to meet it. Merrick's five-day vigil at his mother's bedside was not passive endurance. It was an elected suffering. A decision about the kind of man he wanted to be, made in full knowledge of what it would cost. He says, with characteristic directness: "I wouldn't have been that guy seven years ago." The man who could make that decision was built, piece by piece, by everything that came before.

There is something here too about the transmission of emotional literacy across generations. Merrick's father couldn't say 'I love you' until the week he died. His grandfather was shaped by a war that sent him away before his son could know him. These are not failures of character. They are the accumulated weight of a culture that told men, across generations, that emotion was weakness and distance was strength. Merrick has made a different choice with his own children. He tells his son he loves him regularly, to the point of mild teenage irritation. He is, in this quiet way, rewriting a pattern. And that, as much as anything else he has built, is his legacy.



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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