

Find Your Own Path

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*How to Create the Life You
Really Want*

FIONA BUCKLAND



PENGUIN MICHAEL JOSEPH

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To my family

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Preface

The first panic attack came for me when I was forty-two. It had been stalking me undetected for a while, waiting for the perfect moment for the inevitable meeting. The road had been smoothed in the preceding years by a series of events that shook my foundations: a relationship ended, my brother suffered a critical illness, I experienced a severe episode of depression and left what I had believed would be my secure job and home. I unconsciously tried to plug the chasm that opened up below me with my fail-safe habits of work, socializing and taking care of others. But now, although I was pulling the old levers, the machinery wasn't responding. My life had run out of road and I needed to find another way forward.

I was born the only child of an unmarried Irish nurse, who died of breast cancer when I was two years old. I was eventually adopted by my English foster parents. They rarely talked about my birth mother and I grew up not wanting to upset them by asking. I spent a lot of time alone, reading, playing in the garden or dancing in my room. I was bright but bored, and often in trouble at school. All I had of my birth mother was a photograph of me as a toddler sitting on her knee on our last Christmas together. If I could show you this picture now, you would see some gifts scattered around, with a white tinsel Christmas tree in the background and the kind of seventies

furniture that's become achingly fashionable again. She is gazing down at little me, so when I look at the photo, I can't see her face. I can't consciously remember her now, and many times over the years I held the picture flat in my palm, tilting it this way and that, as if by some miracle her chin would lift and I could see her again. But she remained out of reach.

I left home without a goal, but with curiosity and a love of learning about the world and the stories of people in it, which drew me to the path of academia. Eventually I did a PhD in Performance Studies at New York University. I still loved to dance and sensed that there was something important being created when people danced together in social spaces. I made this the focus of my research and interviewed people who went to lesbian and gay clubs, who told me that they performed the stories of their true selves and created community when they danced.

My PhD complete and first book published, I returned to the UK with an instinct that my next big adventure lay not in the slow lane of academia but in the new frontiers of e-commerce. I joined the team at a big online book retailer – an evangelizing upstart at the time. We knocked on the doors of publishers and cockily informed them that we were the future. After a few years, one of them poached me. So it was that I found myself approaching forty with a corporate career, a long-term relationship, a mortgage and a growing realization that this could be what my life would look like for the next twenty-five years. I was coasting. I rarely danced any more. Then came the series of life events that shook all this apart.

I managed and coped – for a while at least. Then one morning, I awoke breathless, heart racing. Unable to stand, I slid out of bed and landed in a heap on the floor. Something had finally caught up with me. Now I had to understand what.

A good friend saw my distress and suggested therapy. It was a leap of faith. The process couldn't promise to make me better, but it could make me different – if I chose to be. Yet I held fast to a story of loss and abandonment through which I framed my life experience. I couldn't conceive of any other possible story because of a terrible, unspoken belief which unconsciously ran my life: I was the cause of my mother's death. I believed that my birth had triggered her cancer. Out of loyalty to her and in fear of a dreadful reckoning, I had lived my life up to that point unconsciously convinced that I would die at the same age as her. I couldn't imagine living for a moment longer than she had. As I approached that birthday, the panic attacks were internal alarm bells ringing to attract my attention. 'Here!' they hollered. 'Something deep in you needs to speak, and you need to listen. Your old life has come to an end; you must imagine a new one so you can live.'

My old story felt like a coat I had worn for so long I had forgotten it wasn't my skin. I had to free myself from my tenacious old narrative of loss, my vicious inner critics and saboteurs, and my habitual achieving, working and partying to cope, so that I could create a new, more authentic and meaningful story, forged by who I was at heart. My mother was dead at forty-six, but I wasn't. I had to *believe* I could live a different life, then *choose* to live it. It

was as if I had been living in a big house with many rooms but had chosen to stay in the kitchen where I felt comfortable. But someone kept knocking on the front door and the pipes clanked in distant, boarded-up rooms. I kept turning up the music to block them out, but they became louder and louder, until they eventually threatened to shake the edifice apart. So I opened the door, to find a part of myself standing there asking, ‘Why don’t you let me speak? Why won’t you care for me?’ I brought that deeper part of me inside, and we started to open my house together, room by room. There was so much more to me than I could have imagined or lived up to that point, and although the process felt painful at times, it was less so than living a smaller life, disconnected from who I was at heart.

This was the start of my inner work. It wasn’t until I had opened out more of those rooms that I could begin to figure out who I could be in the world from the inside out. I needed to know and accept myself more before I could forge an authentic path for myself.

Outer changes didn’t happen immediately, which is important for you to know. Sometimes I still say, ‘Hey, universe, I want my cup filled with exactly what I want, in exactly this measure, and I want it now, please.’ If you can relate to this impatience, there’s no shame. I have discovered that being so focused on the cup, I can miss everything around me waiting for me to notice it.

Sometimes the signs are there, but it takes a while to see them. It took redundancies from three jobs that, in retrospect, I was not entirely comfortable in before I finally got the message that sitting in the corporate or

managerial chair might not be where I could feel most authentic, fulfilled and impactful, no matter how amazing the chair. In my personal life, relationships didn't end up in ways that perhaps I hoped for, although I made some lifelong friends. I had to move home again and again – sometimes pulled, sometimes pushed. Sometimes the path opens up in front of you. Sometimes it is shaped by the paths that close behind you. At a certain point – the one you have arrived at – I decided to put my hands on the wheel of my life rather than react to events or hold on to old, false beliefs and ways I had done things in the past. I set out to discover what would fulfil me now, and actively find my own path. It's an illusion to imagine that we have complete control over our lives, but if we can check that our ship is sound, our shipmates on board and our hands on the wheel, then we can steer through storms a little more easily, adapt more thoughtfully and hold true to our North Star, even if we get blown off course sometimes.

At the beginning, I felt a bit lost and didn't know how to start. What made all the difference was working with a life coach. With his help, I took another leap of faith to explore the question that was now important to me: how can I bring my essential nature, potential, experience and passions to be of service in the world? The steps I took led me to my career as a coach, facilitator and writer, helping others explore the same question that continues to mean so much to me. But this wasn't only about my career. In my personal life, I am more loving, honest, vulnerable and compassionate with myself and others, and I have much better boundaries. I discovered that so much

of what I already was had laid the foundations upon which I could build, and I could also develop and learn more. You'll probably discover that too. You are not starting from scratch, and you are not finished yet.

My life story has given me many resources. I care about my own and others' growth, love learning and creating, and can lean as deeply into others' feelings as I am able to with my own. I can accept my own messiness more, and can accept my clients' wholeheartedly. I believe in taking action, and in being a positive influence in the world – professionally and personally – because the world needs us. Now I bring all of this to coach people to find their own paths, on which, rather than following the internal and external scripts that run their lives, they connect with their authentic selves and become the authors and creators of more meaningful lives. I also work with people who want to take leadership not only of their own lives but of people, projects and organizations, making the world a better place in the process. I believe that we are all leaders, whether we see ourselves that way or not, and when we find our own path, we give permission to others to do the same.

Today, I fold more of who I am into my work and life, and help others to do likewise. I feel great joy at the privilege of life itself, a gift given to me by my mother. I have crossed over a threshold into a life I could never have imagined would be my own – in which I can choose to live more fully.

Until recently, however, there was one place I couldn't go. It's a patch of earth in south-west Ireland where my birth mother is buried. For years, I tried to find its

location, but my efforts were in vain, and frustratingly, like her face in the photo, she remained hidden. I papered over the door of that room by pretending I didn't care. When I finally allowed my heart to long for it, and stood in front of that door, I had no idea how to open it. Then something extraordinary and wonderful happened. Out of the blue, I received a message via social media from my birth family, whom I had never considered contacting in case they didn't know or want to know about me. I received more than one gift that day. I discovered that the world was bigger than I had imagined and included magic, mystery and blessings outside of my logical understanding. Only when I asked for what I truly wanted could I receive what I had never imagined possible.

When I travelled to Ireland a few months later, I discovered my birth family had kept a treasure trove of photographs. Finally, I could see the faces of both my parents, so full of life and love. The family had even held on to my christening robe as a talisman, hoping one day I would find them and they could return it to me. I held the white lace in my hands, struck by the smallness of the collar through which my baby neck had once slipped. With astonishment, I understood how tiny I had once been, how vulnerable, how utterly dependent on the love of my mother, and how loveable. Now it was time. My relatives pointed me towards the place where my mother lies buried and left me to go there alone.

By the ruins of the old chapel, under grey skies, I sat on the grass next to her grave, and the words came simply: 'Hello, I found you again.' As I uttered them, the sun came out and touched my face with warmth, and it

felt like her love. In that moment, I realized that I had rewritten my story from one of loss to one of love. Although I hadn't been able to see her, she had seen me, caught in that moment by the photographer, gazing at me, loving me.

We are at a point when people are looking at the work they do, where they live, who they live with and the lives they lead, and saying, 'Enough.' Whatever brought them to seek out my coaching services, without exception each of my clients wants to find their own path, rather than stay stuck in jobs, relationships, locations and lives that ask much while simultaneously reducing their sense of authenticity and meaning. You are standing on the threshold of an old life you have outgrown or left, peering through to see if you can discern what might become your path. I am sending you a signal from the other side: you have the power to write your own story. This is what you are feeling the call to do. Whatever has brought you here, you are now ready to put your own hands on the wheel of your life and – rather than reacting to external events and the inner storms which can blow us off course – steer it in alignment with who you are at heart.

It takes inner work to make outer change, and this is what I am going to help you to do, by giving you some tools. What you'll learn you'll put into action, and it will transform your life in ways you might not yet be able to imagine right now, so take a small leap of faith. I know not everyone can have a life coach of their own, which is why I have written this book. I have helped others and I hope this book will help you. I stand with you on the

edge of something big. I am excited for you, however lost you might feel right now. When I work with a new client, it's as if I am opening a new book, with an as yet unknown journey ahead. You have opened your book. This is your time to write the next chapter of your story. Let's begin.

Introduction

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy:*
Inferno, Canto I, translated by
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

If you are living your life right, there may come a time when you find yourself – like Dante – lost. What once brought you joy now feels flat and small. You might have that Sunday evening dread of returning to work that once excited you but now feels heavy and chore-like. You might look at the people with whom you spend most time, where you live, what you talk about, and how you spend the precious hours and days of your life and feel strangely uninvolved, drained, restless or frustrated. You repeat the strategies that quietened discontent in the past, only to find they no longer work. Then there are events such as a pandemic, redundancy, the failure of a project or business, bereavement, illness, retirement, relationship commitment or breakdown, or the birth of children that shake up your once settled life and demand that you create a new one. Because opportunities aren't equal or fair for all, or because systems you might have hoped would

support or reward you fail to, and you have to find other ways forward. Or you reach that point in life when you find yourself face-to-face with the brevity and preciousness of your existence, and wonder how you might make the best of your time, or give something back. Whatever brought you here has seeded that most vital of questions: ‘How do I want to live my life now?’ Where you once knew the path, you now feel lost.

Pause here. Read that first sentence again. I want you to see feeling lost – uncomfortable as it might be – not as a personal deficiency deserving judgement or a fix but as an indication you are living your life *right*. I am sorry that you feel lost. I have been there myself and know that the experience can feel difficult and the question of what to do with your life can seem overwhelming. I have worked for years with people in the same situation as you. Not everyone can have personal sessions with a coach, so I have written this book because I hope to share with you what will help move you past where you are now to what might be possible next. You might not be able to see it yet but it is there, waiting for you. Right now, you only have my word for it. I ask you to trust me when I say that although you might *feel* something is wrong with you, nothing *is* wrong.

You are standing at a threshold – a place between the path you have been following and the choice to find another. You sense there is something more: more potential, more to discover, more to give to your life, your relationships, your work and to the world, more of *you*, but the way forward isn’t clear. You’re ready to find your own path.

You're not alone. As well as being a guide to help you find it, this book includes stories of people who have crossed this threshold and found their own meaningful path by changing their lives to fulfil more of their potential, to be more authentic – their lives aligned with who they are on the inside, making a positive impact in the time they have.

Eva is typical. In her mid-thirties at the time, she came to me because she felt stuck in her current life. She had overcome a great deal to get to where she was – redundancy, bad relationships, miscarriages and poor health – and she now had a job, a loving partner and a child. Yet she sensed that she had more to give, more potential to discover and bring into her life, and a greater contribution to make, but she wasn't sure what it was or how she would go about finding out and putting it into action.

'Is this it?' she wondered. 'Do I just keep my head down, swallow how I feel, and be grateful?'

After a few sessions working together, a shift happened. Using the processes and practices in this book, she realized what was important and meaningful to her and what got in the way of putting it into action; she tackled those obstacles and took steps to change her life. It wasn't the journey she was expecting. She realized what all my clients realize: what she was looking for wasn't a new job title or more pay but a more meaningful life – one in which she was creating her path, rather than accepting what was offered to her. You're going to discover her story later.

Feeling grateful for the life we have doesn't mean that

we can't make changes. While gratitude is important for our well-being, if we use it to smother or avoid the need or desire to make changes in our lives that would make them more meaningful, then we never allow a part of ourselves to speak. In this book, we're going to do just that.

Eva's realization was gradual, and came as a result of naturally growing and maturing. Once she had learned how to be an 'adult' in the world – socially successful, paying bills, having a committed relationship and becoming a parent – she found that the work that had made her happy when she was in her twenties no longer fulfilled her, and that there was more potential she now wanted to explore. Psychologists see our lives as having stages. In First Adulthood, we learn how to be successful in the world; in Second Adulthood, we yearn for greater authenticity and meaning in our lives. (For more on life stages, see Appendix 1.) This is why if you are feeling stuck, it doesn't mean there is anything wrong with you but that you are naturally maturing.

But sometimes we get thrown from the path we were following, and have to create a new one. Although we might wish it were otherwise, life doesn't run in a straight line but includes change and adversities, which demand we take a different direction. I invited several other people, as well as clients, to tell me how they found their own path, and they told stories of just such choices. Mia is one of them. An elegant, thoughtful teacher and dancer in her forties, she had to forge a different life for herself when she unexpectedly lost her work and home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another, Charley, a bright and soulful

woman, now in her thirties, is a former military officer. She left the forces by choice, but she witnessed many ex-colleagues who, on being routinely discharged after years of service, felt they had been cast out of the only institution in which their lives had had meaning. As she described it, even though they knew the end of their military service was coming, some remained anchored in the past, looking back with a sense of loss rather than forward with one of potential. Those who broke out of this found new ways forward that brought them new sources of meaning.

We are living within systems that are often unfair and don't offer opportunities equally. I want to introduce you to Devon, a warm and spiritually grounded man in his sixties, full of life, with a sense of wonder and exploration, who also offered his story. He was one of a trailblazing generation of black actors in the 1970s and '80s. But he had to struggle with not being asked to read for parts. Because of systemic prejudice, he and others have been overlooked for opportunities, promotions or roles. Faced with exhaustion, frustration, hardship or lack of fulfilment, they found other routes to meaning in their lives.

You're going to hear more about the stories of Eva, Mia, Charley, Devon and others, and how they found their own paths. See them as people who have gone before you, and are championing you, who believe that you can fulfil more of your potential, no matter where you are now. They have their hands on your back to support you.

Ageing can also bring you to the threshold of making a choice about how you want to live your life. If you are

living your life right, then, sooner or later, you'll become aware that your lifespan is finite, and you may ask yourself what you want to do with the time you have left. As I write, I am experiencing shock at how I have suddenly become a middle-aged woman with fewer years ahead than behind me. Growing old is a privilege my birth mother didn't have but, if you're not there yet, I can only say it's not for cissies, though to me it is in many ways wonderful, not least because now I focus more on what's important and have perspective on how I want to live the remainder of my life. Middle age definitely brings you to the threshold, with a few creaking joints the least of your challenges. If this is you, then I am here with you, as are others in this book. My hand is on your back, even if it has more wrinkles than a few years ago.

However you come to find yourself at the threshold, remember you are not alone. I have been there. Many before you have found themselves at the same place, multitudes are here with you now, and countless more will reach it at some point in the future.* What matters now is what you do about it.

At this threshold, when faced with a choice to find your own path, I ask you to consider questions different

* Post-Covid, for instance, polls revealed that huge numbers of people reconsidered the major sources of meaning in their lives, such as what they do, where they live and whom they love. Over three-quarters of people in the UK re-evaluated their lives (YouGov); worldwide, forty per cent of workers planned to leave their employer (Microsoft Work Trend Index); and divorce lawyers saw triple-digit growth in enquiries (Stewarts).

from ‘How can I be successful?’ – based on how much money you make, what you own, your job title, your social media followers, where you live or what your social or romantic life looks like. Here, ask, ‘Who am I really? How can I live an authentic life – one true to me, rather than the one I am expected to live?’ Your touchstone is that to explore this you become more yourself.

The Threshold

I would be lying if I told you this is going to be easy. The root of the word ‘threshold’ comes from *thresh* or *thrash*, and it describes the place where grain would be separated from the chaff. This doesn’t happen without a good shake. When you cross the threshold, you separate from social and cultural scripts about what you *should* be and do. You start a conversation with your deeper self – to find out who you really are on the inside. That’s a brave thing to do, because the scripts are in many ways reassuring and rewarding, and there’s no guarantee that what comes next can offer you the same external validation. Tuning in to the inner voice of your deeper self can also be tough because often it appears as physical, emotional or spiritual distress, and who wants to listen to that when you can avoid or anaesthetize it? Distress lets you know there’s action required but doesn’t offer a constructive way forward.

Here’s how it spoke to Eric, now aged fifty, who as a younger man had a successful career as a top salesperson, with a marriage, children, and a big house with a four-wheel drive parked in front of it.

‘I just can’t keep doing this.’

A self-made man, he had been the poster boy for success. But he had become overweight, he felt his sexuality was repressed by family and church, and his marriage was falling apart. Once he decided to cross the threshold and change his life by being healthier, developing his spirituality and accepting his sexual nature, he discovered that as he became more the person he had the potential to be, his wife felt resentful. He could have chosen to return to being the version of himself that was acceptable to others, but as he said, ‘In order to please an external rather than my own internal authority, I would have to lie. And the juice wasn’t worth the squeeze.’

Crossing that threshold had huge consequences for him and others for whom he cared greatly, but he had faith it would be best for all of them. He left his church, his marriage and, eventually, his full-time sales career. Without knowing what his future would look like, he had to – as he puts it – ‘jump into the chasm’ and find his path. You’ll also hear more about that later.

Your own life changes may not need to be as dramatic as Eric’s. But however you found yourself here, you’ll know you are at this threshold when you have a choice:

- to continue to live or try to go back to the life you know, numbing or ignoring the pain and frustration of inauthenticity;
- to hunt for something outside yourself – another job, relationship, location, friendship group or fitness regime – in the hope that it holds the promise of a more meaningful life, rather than

going inwards to discover what might be meaningful to you first; or

- to explore who you are now and what you care about, let go of some ways of being that feel fixed, known and safe, but that no longer serve you, and embark on the journey of a more meaningful, authentic path.

Many people choose the first two options, for lots of reasons. But here you are with this book in your hand. What you might be sensing, but don't yet know, is what I aim to help you discover in the course of this book. You are bigger on the inside. Within you is potential waiting for you to let it speak. This is the call you are hearing. The upcoming act of your life is what you do and become next. But to find it, you'll have to tackle what gets in the way.

What Gets in the Way

Small wonder that we need some support to get across the threshold and find our own path. As clients, interviewees for this book and I have discovered, powerful internal and external forces are very invested in our remaining where we are.

We naturally need physical and material security and safety. For a lot of us, day-to-day life is about surviving. When you urgently need a place to live, to pay your bills or to recover from a health crisis, finding your own path can seem like a luxury, and that's understandable. When I

had no money and was homeless, getting those basic needs covered was my priority, and it will be the same for anyone. Also, uncertainty is psychologically challenging to manage and we sometimes understandably prefer choices that lower our anxiety by offering security, even if that means sacrificing an option that might be more fulfilling.

We built our old lives partly for psychological and social safety, and trying to create change will provoke intentionally protective, but sabotaging, internal mechanisms. What we know forms our comfort zone, and inner critics and saboteurs will defend this territory against the unknown, and make it sound like a sensible place to stay.

At the same time, our cultures, communities, families and even loved ones transmit powerful messages about the 'right' way to live, and it's frightening to think that we face their rejection and condemnation if we don't live our lives the way they think we should. Every day we receive images of what our lives ought to look like from advertising, media and social media, which induce discontent and longings for escape or a quick-click fix. Our economic model is reliant upon our consumption of products and services that promise to relieve the anxiety and dissatisfaction these images generate. At the same time, our 24/7 engagement in manufactured outrage spikes counterfeit aliveness. We are constantly distracted. When we are streaming boxsets, scrolling social media, bombarded with a 24-hour news cycle, trying to get everything done and plan the next weekend, we might be chasing fleeting experiences of happiness, relief or accomplishment, but do we pause enough to ask, 'Am I

living the life I truly want to live? Do I feel it's meaningful? And do we do anything about it if we're not sure? Why would that matter anyway?

Why Finding Your Own Path Matters

Answering the call to find a meaningful, authentic path in life has a number of powerful benefits that aren't dependent on material or external measures of success.

1. Your sense of happiness and achievement emerges from a deeper sense of fulfillment within, rather than depending on external stimulation or validation. Living others' scripts, chasing fleeting happiness or momentary achievement can still leave you dissatisfied and restless in the long term.
2. Although you can't always choose what life throws at you, you have a sense of agency over how you respond, rather than being the passive recipient of a series of events. Don't you want to have a say in how your story unfolds?
3. You are better able to tolerate difficult feelings and challenges, which helps you deal with life's struggles and adversities.
4. Because of this, you can look back at your life and struggles, see how they made you the person you are now and feel a sense of acceptance and compassion for yourself and shared humanity with others.

5. It reduces the number and intensity of your regrets. The number-one regret people have at the end of their lives is that they did what others expected them to do, rather than living authentically.*

I hope that by the end of this book you'll be able to feel at least some of these benefits, and even add a few more. I invite you to heed the call to find your path and live a more meaningful life. It is calling you with good reason.

How This Book Can Help

This is a guide to the conversation we need to start with ourselves to create a more meaningful life, and to the ways we can start to put it into action. Here are my guiding principles, which will help you know what to expect.

This is a book for humans. We are not perfect; neither is anyone else. We feel vulnerable and frightened at times, and that's part of being human. We deserve compassion, not judgement. I also don't see us as machines that need fine-tuning to maximum optimization. Life isn't an endless conveyor belt of tasks we need to get on top of by being more productive and efficient. Trust me, on your last day on Earth, you won't be glad you emptied your email inbox weekly. What matters is not how much we do but doing the important things that bring meaning to our lives.

* Bronnie Ware, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying* (2019).

This is a book that is relevant for all parts of your life. You can use it to focus on career, relationships or anything else. Your life is bigger than just one part of it.

Your hands are on the wheel. If this sounds scary, take heart. You have more power than you might realize. Right now, you need some help, and that's nothing to be ashamed of or worried about, it's normal. See this book as your guide, offering insights, tools, exercises and practices that will help you tackle fears and resistance, discover your path and take steps to steer along it.

We are all doing our best. I am not going to promise that creating a meaningful life requires only that you use the right formula, come up with a plan and execute it, as if being human doesn't come with fears, resistances and tendencies towards repeating patterns, and as if we live in a world in which opportunities are equal for all. I don't have a magic pill. The concept that we can simply dream it and then be it is laden with privilege. That's also why, in a later chapter, I focus on how we can raise our resilience when things don't go our way.

Having a more meaningful life is possible for all of us. We can get caught in the trap of having big, lofty notions of what a meaningful life is supposed to look like. What if we are not the ones to single-handedly save the rainforests, find a cure for cancer, write a great novel or develop an app that changes the world? What then? Does that mean our lives lack meaning? Absolutely not. Meaning is imbued by you in whatever you are being or doing. I just stepped outside to empty my bins and paused to hear a bird sing. I felt aware of how big and extraordinary the natural world is, and that was a meaningful

moment for me. It's a choice I make in how to live my life, even in each ordinary moment.

We have an impact on others. No matter what we choose to be and do, or how we decide to show up and act, our choices impact not only our own lives but those of others too. In finding your own path, you inspire and support them to find their own.

You are not alone. It helps to know that there are others like you who found a way to live a more meaningful life. I have included my own story and those of clients and others, who have kindly given their permission. Most of the names have been changed, and some are composites of several people, but the issues are typical. Although the circumstances and stories may be different from yours, like you, we all found ourselves at a point where we needed to figure out how to change our lives. It took reflection, awareness, acceptance, permission, resilience and action, and that's what this book is going to help you with.

As a coach, I work with people to help them develop and follow through on plans for a more fulfilled life, and support them to identify and manage internal and external obstacles that arise. I am not a therapist or a healthcare professional; if you feel you need help from one of those, then please do this as soon as you can. I know how much therapy helped me. I'll include some information in the resource section at the end. In this book, I am interested in offering some guidance along the journey of this messy, precious, real human life to help you find your own path so that, at the end of your days, you can say, 'I lived the life I

was meant to live. I brought the gifts of my whole self into my life, and I did my best.' If you are curious about embarking on this journey, then I hope this book will be of use. Don't just use it once, return to it whenever you need to. Given the demands and importance of the task, we all need some help.

Why I Wrote This Book

My own call to action came from two parallel journeys – professional and personal. Professionally, I have come to an insight. Although people often come to coaching or a course I facilitate with a presenting issue, such as a tricky boss, lack of work–life balance, a leadership challenge, the need to start again after illness or redundancy, or a desired solution in the form of a new job or a move to the country, what they really seek is *meaning*, which we can find when we create a path that aligns with

- *values* that we choose to live by – those inner integral beliefs and codes that guide us from within;
- and *purpose* that we devote our energy towards – the bigger picture that gives the preciousness of our lives meaning.

This insight, as well as many of the ideas, exercises and practices in this book, builds upon the work of others. I have received superb training from the founders and teachers of the Co-Active Training Institute, the Embodied Facilitator Course, the Earth Wisdom Teachings

Sacred Leadership Programme, the Embercombe Journey and others, who have influenced the exercises and approaches in this book, as have my own coaches, therapists, spiritual teachers and other guides to my emotional self-development. Behind this stand psychologists, neuroscientists, psychotherapists and generations of teachers, shamans and spiritual leaders who have handed down to us practices and ways of thinking and being that are truly useful, such as self-reflection, mindfulness, acceptance, nature connection and the integration of body and mind. It feels good to know that we're on solid ground when we are ready to stand up and start walking out of the woods. Tapping into the wisdom of those who have come before, my clients and I, along with many others, find practices and insights that work – not just for a quick fix that fades but for deep transformation that lasts.

Which brings me to my personal call-to-action. I have walked this path myself. I am still walking it. I sense I always will. Feeling lost at times is part of that path, not a separate sinkhole. I came to find myself in a dark wood in my early forties, lost not only in what I was doing in the world but also from myself. These are inextricably linked: if you don't know yourself better, you don't know what would give your life meaning. Because I am living my life right – growing, facing challenges and setbacks, aware that I am human and mortal – I still struggle at times, and need to make space to check in with myself and find and reconnect with my path. And when things don't go to plan, I still need to recover, learn and figure out what to do next. I don't need fixing, because I am not

broken – and neither are you, although it might feel like that sometimes. I have written the guide I wish I had had, and which I still need.

The Journey of the Book

Here's where we are going. Integrating what I have learned and practised with myself and clients, I have structured this book as a series of steps, although you may find that you want to go to some chapters before others, depending on what you need. For instance, if inner critics are making it hard for you from the outset, read that chapter first, or if your energy levels are too low to start, check out Chapter Six. I start with the inner work to help you get to know yourself and put yourself in the driver's seat of your life, and then we hit the road.

Step One: Separate from Old Scripts. Spot and reduce the power of those internalized scripts and beliefs that hold you where you are.

Step Two: Make Space for Your Bigger Self. Switch off autopilot, find space and time to connect with yourself at a deeper level and make more useful, conscious choices.

Step Three: Start the Conversation. Connect to what really matters to you with some powerful self-reflection exercises.

Step Four: Build Your Compass. Align your path with your integral, authentic beliefs or principles to feel more energized and motivated and to seek

out and attract more opportunities and people that share them.

Step Five: Shift Perspective and Let Go. One day will be your last, so – rather than collapse into nihilism or cling to the scripts of your youth – embrace the need to live your precious life with purpose, grace and integrity, focusing on what ultimately matters and letting go of what doesn't.

Step Six: Replenish Your Wells. Discover more about what drains or energizes your different wells of energy so you have the resources you need.

Step Seven: Make Peace with Inner Critics and Saboteurs. As you find your own path, build a healthy relationship with the parts of you that are going to get in your way, and get them out of the driving seat of your life.

Step Eight: Find Allies. Gather the inner and outer support you need.

Step Nine: Give Yourself Permission to Make Choices. Break through analysis-paralysis and perfectionism, using your heart and gut as well as your head.

Step Ten: Nurture Your Ideas and Put Them into Action. Purpose, nourish and strengthen your ideas and get moving with small experiments.

Step Eleven: Raise Your Resilience. Recover and grow from difficulties and setbacks.

Step Twelve: Tell Your Story. Tell your new story for yourself and for others, so that you can acknowledge how far you've come and be a guide for those who are ready to find their own path.

Get Ready to Start

You'll need a journal – somewhere you write down and review what you are discovering. Journalling here is not quite the same as keeping a diary in which you download and free-write whatever is going on in your life. It's a bit more structured than that. Within this book I have included:

Exercises for you to try, which will help you discover more about yourself, and which you can do more than once if needed. Use your journal to record what you learn so you can lock it in and remind yourself.

Practices to embed into your life regularly. Change happens through small choices that you make every day rather than one giant leap. Writing down their effects will help motivate you to continue.

Journal Questions to help you reflect. You can revisit these whenever you need to.

Research shows that, as well as increasing self-awareness, journalling can help improve our sense of self-efficacy or our belief that we can act in ways that will help us reach goals. Regular journalling can boost well-being and resilience and reduce anxiety. Even fifteen minutes a day has an effect. Writing helps us think better: when we write, we slow down and tease out those fast, tangled thoughts into something more manageable. Our thoughts often arrive like *millefeuille* – that flaky pastry

slice which holds a thousand messy layers in one overwhelming mouthful. But when we write, it's as if we roll out the pastry of our thoughts and can reflect upon them with more distance. You can revisit the discoveries you record in your journal whenever you get stuck or lost. When you do, there's nothing wrong; it's part of the process. Gather yourself and reset. Turn your journal to a new page. Each day is a fresh opportunity.

As you prepare to embark on this journey, I invite you to pause and notice how you feel right now. I often ask new clients to notice their patterns or habits of thinking, feeling and doing, using a simple intuitive model of the seasons, inspired by embodiment teacher Mark Walsh. We're always noticing, not judging or shaming – which is important to remember throughout this book. Becoming more aware is great, because then you can make conscious choices.

Journal Questions

Open your journal and write a few notes about which of these seasons you can relate to (you can adjust this if you are in the southern hemisphere). Perhaps it's something completely different – if so, nice noticing!

Spring. Perhaps you feel excited, ready to dive in at the beginning. Maybe you have a tendency to drop off later.

Summer. You might feel more tentative at the beginning, but once you warm up, you love full

flow. Maybe you want every day to be great, but get disheartened when it's not always like that.

Autumn. Perhaps this is your pattern: as long as you have a book or a course, you feel great, but once you finish it, you drop off. Or maybe you rush to get to the end of each chapter so you can get to the harvest of results more quickly.

Winter. Perhaps you dread the times when nothing seems to be happening and you feel impatient for spring. Or maybe you enjoy the quiet isolation of self-reflection.

As I am going to remind you as you go along, there is no right or wrong, no way you *should* be. What is important is that you increase your awareness and accept yourself with compassion – after all, we are humans doing our best. Then, knowing what you do about yourself, choose what you want to be and do – this is how you find your own path.

Further Journal Questions

Take a moment now to explore these questions in your journal:

- What do you want from this book?
- What patterns or habits of thinking, feeling and doing might get in the way?
- What might help and what would you like to try?
- How will you remind yourself of this?

We don't credit ourselves enough with the courage it takes to find our own path. I stand here at the threshold, between the life you have been living and the life that's possible, and welcome you with open arms and a whole heart. Thank you for trusting in me, and in yourself. You are just at the beginning of the next great adventure. It's called the rest of your life.