



THE WAY OF MA

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Before we get into this, I should probably tell you who I am.

My name is Philip Surry. I'm 44 as I write this, 45 in October, and I live on Guernsey, a small island in the Channel Islands.

More importantly than any of that, I'm Ava and Alfie's Dad.

Ava is seventeen. Alfie is fourteen. They are, without question, the greatest things that have ever happened to me.

Everything else I've done in my life is a bonus compared with those two. I'm ridiculously proud of them and I love being their Dad more than I can really explain.

I also have a dog called Billy, although for reasons that probably say more about me than him, he is generally known as Sir William.

I was born in the UK. When I was five, Mum and Dad took my sisters and me to Australia. We travelled, moved around, and eventually landed in Guernsey when I was nine.

I grew up here. I've travelled a lot since, and I've lived away, but I came back.

Truthfully, I came back because my people were here. I had mates I'd grown up with who felt more like brothers. Over time that grew to become my children, my family, my work and the life I'd built.

Guernsey became home.

I didn't leave school with some great plan for my life. I was good at art, and I loved it. I still do. Give me a canvas and I can disappear for hours. I love starting without really knowing what I'm going to make and letting the brush go somewhere before my thinking brain has caught up. That probably tells you something about me.

I've always gone quite hard at things, it's in my nature, I'm a passionate guy. Sometimes that has been useful, sometimes it really hasn't.

When I was eighteen, I drank and drove. I crashed my car. I could have died, really should have died. Worse, I could have killed somebody who had absolutely nothing to do with my stupidity.

I ended up in court. I remember standing there and taking it on the chin. I knew there was no excuse.

I told the judge that I understood I had endangered not only myself but other people, and that whatever punishment came my way, I would learn from it and try to make amends with the way I lived my life afterwards. Something profound shifted in me that day.

I was eighteen. I didn't have a clue what that promise would actually mean; I just knew I had work to do. I certainly didn't suddenly become a saint. I've had dark periods, I've been depressed, I've had battles with alcohol and used it to change how I have felt.

I've been divorced, I've made mistakes in relationships. I've been overweight and unhealthy, and then I've also gone the other way and made health and exercise another obsession.

For a long time I was very good at replacing one extreme with another. I'm still learning not to do that.

Somewhere along the way, I found my full time profession; Massage therapy

I'd been a runner and athlete, and after experiencing massage for recovery I became fascinated by what it could do, so I learned it myself and got qualified. I fell in love with it and built a client base locally.

I've been a massage therapist for more than fifteen years now. I've spent thousands and thousands of hours with my hands on people, valuing each person as a unique being.

Over the years my work became something I now call the Ma Method.

The treatment itself is combined with an immersive soundscape, but really the thing I became interested in was deeper than technique. What happens when somebody finally lets go? What happens in the breath? What happens in the silence?

I haven't taken on a new regular client for more than a year and a half. There are more than 150 people on my waiting list. I'm enormously grateful for that and I'm now looking to train more therapists with what I have created; the Ma Method.

Interestingly the treatment room has taught me far more than massage.

People talk when you spend enough time with them. You hear about marriages, affairs, children, deaths, illness, fear, joy, loneliness, regret, sex, money, grief, everything. If you listen properly, people teach you.

In 2017, while I was going through my own divorce negotiations, and trying to keep my life and business afloat, something else happened. At the time I was also working as a part time croupier on live television, whilst still building my client base for massage.

Yes, really. I'd put on a tuxedo, stand in front of cameras, spin a roulette wheel and sometimes work until four in the morning a couple of times a week.

There are stories about that later but it taught me to put myself out there and be confident.

Around the same time, a mate needed somewhere to talk and someone to talk to, so I invited him round my place and called it Man Club.

I knew inside me that I could use my live television skills to promote and be courageous so I put something out on Facebook; Man Club.

A place to talk and listen, for men.

Nothing particularly sophisticated. Just an invitation for men to come together.

The first problem however, was explaining where I lived.

My house wasn't particularly easy to find, so I told everyone to meet me at Woodies car park at Bordeaux, which was a beach kiosk just around the corner.

I could meet them there and we'd walk back to my house together.

Perfectly sensible right?

Except it was winter.

So there I was, standing in a dark car park waiting to meet a collection of random men I'd found on the internet before taking them back to my house.

It was only afterwards that I thought: This looks really dodgy! But they came.

At first there were only a few of us sitting in my living room, then more came, and more. Eventually there were so many men turning up that I literally ran out of tea and coffee cups.

My living room couldn't hold Man Club anymore. We needed somewhere bigger. Guernsey Mind gave us somewhere to go, and Man Club began to become something far bigger than the little gathering I'd started at home.

The basic idea was incredibly simple. One man held the talking stick and spoke. Everyone else would shut up and listen. No interruption, no judgment, no fixing him, no telling him what he should do. Just listen.

I had no idea at the beginning how much that would teach me.

Men spoke about things they had never said out loud before. Divorce, abuse, addiction, anger, shame, loneliness, fatherhood, grief, and suicide.

There were men who came into those rooms in frighteningly dark places. Some were genuinely thinking about ending their lives, and I watched what happened when other men didn't run away from that.

They listened, they put an arm around each other. They came back the next week. Then, sometimes, the man who had needed everyone else, became the man helping the next bloke through the door.

I don't think I'll ever forget that.

Eventually, Man Club taught me another lesson.

I had become so closely associated with it that I began to wonder whether I'd actually created something that could exist without me, so in 2020 I stepped away. And I had to accept that it might fail.

Months later, after I'd left, I discovered that the men had done something extraordinary. They'd stepped up, they'd formed a board and Man Club had become its own registered charity.

I cannot properly describe how chuffed I felt. Something I'd started in my living room had become something that no longer needed me, and perhaps that was the point.

Years later I would understand this as one of the greatest lessons Man Club ever gave me. Sometimes creating something isn't about holding onto it.

Sometimes you have to trust what you've planted enough to take your hands off it, to let it truly grow. Those men taught me that. They also taught me more about human beings sitting quietly in circles than I could ever have learned from a textbook or course.

The Men at Man Club are one reason this book belongs partly to them. Their courage taught me an enormous amount. So have my clients, my children, my mates, people I've loved, people I've lost, teachers, therapists, books and complete strangers. And of course my dear Dad.

Dad was diagnosed with dementia in 2022. Watching him decline was brutal, and I didn't cope with all of it well. My own health went downhill.

I drank more than I should have, I ate badly. I stopped looking after myself properly.

By 2024 I weighed 97 kilograms. Then some of those mates I'd come back to Guernsey for took one look at me and delivered the sort of compassionate intervention you get from middle-aged men who have known you most of your life.

"Phil, you're a fat bastard."

Fair enough. That hit the nail on the head, or maybe the nail on the bald man's head in this case.

One of my closest mates followed it with two words:

“NO EXCUSES”

That period became the start of another change in my life. But this time I didn't want to simply swap one addiction for another. I wanted to feel good. I wanted to be strong again, run again, move, eat properly, be there for my kids, laugh, see my mates, work on things I cared about, have a beer occasionally without needing ten, and train hard without making the gym my entire personality.

I wanted a fulfilling life I actually enjoyed living.

The last couple of years, including losing Dad, have taught me more than any other period of my life, and somewhere in all of that, this book appeared.

I need to make something clear before you read it. These are not all my ideas. Far from it. I have learned from so many people. Some of the lessons in this book came from my dad, my children, people I love, men sitting in a circle at Man Club, my closest mates, clients lying on a massage table, teachers, therapists, and books. Some came from making a complete mess of something myself and eventually asking what on earth it was trying to teach me.

I'm not writing this because I've cracked life. I haven't. I'm writing it because I've paid attention, and there is one idea that seems to run through almost everything I've learned.

Ma.

A client first mentioned the Japanese concept of Ma to me after a massage. We were talking about philosophy and Japanese culture, and for some reason that little word stayed with me.

Ma is not easy to translate neatly into English, but it points towards the interval, the space between things, not empty space as in nothingness, but space that has meaning because of what surrounds it.

I started seeing it everywhere. In music, it's the space between the notes.

In art, it's the part of the canvas you don't fill. In massage, I feel it when somebody first lies down and I put my hand at the base of their spine. They breathe into my hand, then they breathe out, and right at the end of that breath there is a tiny pause. The body sinks. The brain chatter seems to disappear. Something lets go.

Ma.

I saw Ma in Man Club too.

A man would pour out something horrendous, something he had perhaps carried for years.

Every instinct in the room wanted to lean on the edge of the chair towards him and make it better. I literally saw this physically happen at times.

Do something.

Say something.

Fix him.

As a facilitator of the circle, I learned at times to lean back. Open my body. Wait. Create the space.

The silence could be deeply uncomfortable, but then something would often happen. The man would speak again, and quite often the words that came after the silence were different from the words that came before it. Deeper.

Like climbing out of the dark tunnel, very often they were the first words pointing towards hope.

That space and practice is sacred – it's Ma

My partner tells me I even make a little noise when I'm properly listening to someone. I don't really know I'm doing it. Apparently it's just a small sound of acknowledgement.

Maybe that's a sound of Ma.

Dad had it. (Although I definitely didn't appreciate it at the time)

Dad could take forever to put his shoes on. I'd be standing at the door thinking, come on, Dad, we need to go. He'd sit there. Tie the laces properly, then probably make a cup of tea. He wasn't interested in my imaginary emergency. He was where he was, he honoured time. I understand that more now. One of the clearest moments of Ma I can remember happened after a long walk with my best mate on the rugged and beautiful channel island of Alderney. We sat outside the Braye Beach Hotel afterwards. Crisp sun, cold air, the sea, and seagulls.

Nothing happened. That was the whole thing. There was nowhere else I needed to be. No yesterday, no tomorrow. Space between. When I think about the most beautiful moments of my life, so many of them are not necessarily the so called big achievements and events.

They're moments when time seemed to disappear.

I think we need more of them Ma moments, because everything around us seems determined to remove the space with phones, notifications, work, noise, opinions, content, another thing to do, another thing to buy, another thing to become.

As you read this book remember that I want these 42 days to help you create enough space to notice your own life. Then decide what you want to do with it. Some days I'll ask you to move, some days to stop, some days to have an uncomfortable conversation, some days to laugh at yourself, some days to look at death.

Some of it will work for you.

Some of it probably won't.

Take what helps and leave space for Ma.

Change state. Create space. Live fully.

I've since realised I'm hardly the first person circling this territory.

Socrates kept asking people to examine how they were living.

Aristotle was interested in what it meant to live well.

The Stoics kept returning to the space between what happens and how we respond.

Viktor Frankl wrote about meaning and responsibility even when circumstances were brutally difficult.

In a very different world, Tony Robbins has spent decades talking about how changing physiology, focus and language can change our state.

Different centuries. Different language.

There is a thread running through all of it that I recognise; the state you're in changes what you can see and what you can do next.

Ma is the part that fascinates me – the space between.

Change the state and space can appear, then you get to choose what you do with it.

The Way of Man is dedicated to my Dad, and it is dedicated to the men of Man Club.

I will never forget the courage I witnessed in those spaces.

Men saying things they were terrified to say.

Men staying beside each other when things became dark.

Men rebuilding themselves and then reaching backwards to help somebody else.

I feel incredibly lucky to have seen it.

I want to pass some of what I learned there, and everywhere else on.

That's really all this is. Things people gave me. Things life taught me and stuff I learned by getting them badly wrong, passed on to you.

I've done the deathbed meditation in this book enough times to know what I want when my turn comes, I'd want Ava and Alfie to know how completely I loved them. I want the people I love to know that I was there.

I want to look back at a life of purpose and service to others, to have left my little patch better than when I found it.

I want to have laughed a lot and recognised a moment and opportunity to create space, Ma.

If this book helps one person feel more alive, make a change they needed to make, forgive themselves, call somebody, get healthier, find some purpose, sit with somebody who is hurting, or simply stop for a moment and realise that the ordinary life happening around them is actually the thing they've been waiting for, then it was worth writing. And if something in here does help you, pass it on.

It was never mine in the first place.

How to Use the Next 42 Days

This is a book, but it is also meant to be lived.

The Way of Ma is built around forty-two practice days, arranged in six movements of seven. You can move through them in six weeks, but you do not have to turn the book into a streak.

A quick note before you begin: some chapters involve exercise, heat, cold, fasting or emotionally difficult reflection. Adapt everything to your health, ability and circumstances. This book is not a substitute for medical or mental-health care, and there is no prize for doing a practice that is wrong for you.

There are forty-two chapters because I wanted the ideas to form a journey rather than a pile of advice. Six movements. Seven practice days in each. Read one chapter on each day you practice, if you can. Do the practice, then go and live your day. If you need a pause, take it, especially between movements. A day off is not falling behind. The next numbered day simply begins when you return. The point is not to finish the book quickly. The point is to notice whether anything changes when you actually live it.

Read one chapter. Do the practice. Then go and live your day.

The practices are designed to accumulate without turning your life into another cluttered project. Each chapter ends with one main practice, a small space to write down what you noticed, and, where useful, one thing to carry forward. That is the workbook. It lives inside the book because the reflection only matters when it sits beside the life that produced it. At the end of each seven-day movement, keep only what genuinely helped. You are building a way of living, not collecting forty-two pieces of homework.

The order matters. First you begin changing state through attention, gratitude, rest, movement, breath, effort, connection and recovery. As the state changes, space begins to appear. Ma. Then we use that space: choosing direction, facing what is true, turning towards other people and finally asking what we are going to put back into the world.

Change state. Create space. Live fully.

You will notice Ma running through all of it.

The practices change your state in different ways.

Sometimes through movement, breath or effort.

Sometimes through gratitude, rest, attention, humour or connection.

As your state changes, space can appear: a pause before speaking, a gap between stimulus and response, enough room to notice what is actually happening and choose what happens next.

Ma,

The point of creating that space is not to withdraw from life, it is to live it more fully.

Don't rush it.

Forty-two practice days is not very long, and neither, when you really think about it and as you'll find, is a life.

Contents

MOVEMENT ONE: WAKE UP

- Day 1: Go at the Speed of Dad
- Day 2: Build a Gratitude Jar
- Day 3: Empty Your Mind Before You Sleep
- Day 4: Return to the Child Who Knew Joy
- Day 5: Visit the Graveyard
- Day 6: The Deathbed Meditation
- Day 7: The Blue Line Day

MOVEMENT TWO: BUILD YOUR BASE

- Day 8: Build Your Base
- Day 9: Your Body Is on Your Side
- Day 10: Exercise Is Never Just Exercise
- Day 11: Let Your Breath Set the Pace
- Day 12: Love Lifts More Than Anger
- Day 13: Stop Making It So Serious
- Day 14: Protect Tomorrow Morning

MOVEMENT THREE: CHOOSE YOUR DIRECTION

- Day 15: Change Something
- Day 16: The Power of One Small Change
- Day 17: Learn How to Learn
- Day 18: Know Your Values
- Day 19: Your Values Need Boundaries
- Day 20: Feel It First
- Day 21: Work Backwards

MOVEMENT FOUR: FACE WHAT IS TRUE

- Day 22: Rehearse It First
- Day 23: Become Your Own Best Coach
- Day 24: Find Someone Who Will Tell You the Truth
- Day 25: Learn to Laugh at Yourself
- Day 26: Make Criticism Useful
- Day 27: What Is This Teaching Me?
- Day 28: As Long As It Takes

MOVEMENT FIVE: CONNECT

- Day 29: Ask the Question, Then Get Out of the Way
- Day 30: Walk Until the Noise Falls Silent
- Day 31: Hold Someone in Mind
- Day 32: The Gentle Nudge
- Day 33: Be the Mirror
- Day 34: Create Your Own Luck
- Day 35: Be Brave Enough to Be Loved

MOVEMENT SIX: PUT IT INTO THE WORLD

- Day 36: Find Your Voice
- Day 37: Be Willing to Look Ridiculous
- Day 38: Find a Problem Worth Solving
- Day 39: Start With One
- Day 40: Build Your Tribe
- Day 41: Get Out of the Way
- Day 42: Leave It Well

MOVEMENT ONE

Wake Up

Before you start changing everything, notice what is already here.

This first week is about slowing the machinery down enough to see your own life again: the ordinary moments, the noise in your head, the things you have forgotten you enjoy, and the uncomfortable fact that none of this lasts forever.

Mortality is here early on purpose.

Remembering that life ends is not meant to make you miserable. It gives energy to everything that follows.

*I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only
the essential facts of life.*

Henry David Thoreau, Walden

DAY 1

Go at the Speed of Dad

My dad was incredibly slow. I don't mean intellectually, I mean the entire world could appear to be collapsing around him and Peter Surry would continue doing whatever he was doing at exactly the same speed. When I was younger this drove me mad, I wanted to get out, see my mates and get on with whatever incredibly important thing teenage Philip had planned.

I'd be standing by the front door telling Dad we were late, bouncing around and getting more and more agitated, and Dad would sit down to put his shoes on.

First he'd loosen the laces properly, slide his foot into the shoe, tighten them carefully, tie them and double-knot them.

Then the other shoe, exactly the same process, methodically, with great care and entirely at his own pace.

Meanwhile I'd be practically vibrating. "Dad. Come on!" It made absolutely no difference, he would finish putting his shoes on properly, stand up, get the keys and leave. Dad simply didn't rush.

There's another story about him that still makes me laugh. Years later my van broke down late one evening, so I rang Dad. "Can you come and tow me home?" "Of course." Brilliant, until he added: "I'll just have a cup of tea first." Of course you will, Dad.

My van has broken down, it's late, I'm stranded, but let's not do anything ridiculous like leave before we've had a cup of tea.

At the time I found it funny and slightly infuriating, but deep within me I had a background feeling it was teaching me something, and it was. Dad knew Ma and he hadn't even been to Japan.

Since Dad died I've thought about these little things much more, the strange habits, the things he said, the way he lived that I barely noticed because he'd always been there.

I think there was something in his slowness that took me a very long time to understand, Dad wasn't very easily infected by somebody else's urgency.

If I was rushing, that didn't automatically mean he had to rush. If something had gone wrong, panicking wasn't going to make it less wrong, the van would still be broken after his tea, he'd just arrive having had a cup of tea and in a calm way. He believed in doing things properly.

I think we've become incredibly good at manufacturing urgency. We rush breakfast to get to work, rush work so we can get home, rush dinner while looking at our phones, rush conversations because we're already thinking about what we need to do afterwards.

Suddenly another day has gone, another week, another year, and we complain that life is moving too quickly. I've started wondering whether part of the problem isn't how quickly time passes, it's how little attention we're giving it while it does.

Think about the difference between drinking a cup of coffee while answering emails, and sitting somewhere outside actually drinking the coffee. Same ten minutes, but a completely different experience of ten minutes.

One barely registers, the other becomes part of your life.

That's what being in the moment does, it doesn't literally give you more time, it allows you to experience more of the time you already have – it changes your perception.

There is research around mindfulness, attention and our perception of time, but I didn't learn this from research, I learned it from watching my dad put his shoes on.

There can be beautiful irony in slowing down as it can sometimes make you better at whatever you're doing anyway. You notice things, make fewer stupid mistakes, listen properly, respond rather than immediately react. But even that isn't really the point, not everything needs to become a productivity hack.

Dad knew it's worth doing something slowly simply because this is your life and you're currently experiencing it and before you know, it's passed.

Pause. Find that space in-between.

Ma

Tie the shoelaces slowly, *really* listen to the person talking to you, walk to the car and take in what is around you, feel the water when you shower, eat the food you're eating and taste it.

Life is made up mostly of what we term ordinary moments, but they are not obstacles between you and the important parts of your life. They are your life.

I wish I'd understood that earlier, I wish I'd been a little less irritated standing at that front door, but perhaps that's another lesson Dad left me.

Some things take as long as they take.

Even understanding your father.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Borrow Dad's Pace

Choose one ordinary task today and do it deliberately slowly. No multitasking. Notice the urge to rush. Finish the task at the speed it actually requires.

WHERE AM I RUSHING?

What did you deliberately slow down today?

What did you notice when you stopped rushing it?

Where in your life are you currently behaving as though there is an emergency when there isn't one?

Whose urgency are you carrying?

☐ Mine ☐ Work ☐ Partner ☐ Family ☐ Phone ☐ Other

What in your life deserves more of your attention, not less of your time?

Carry forward: Before rushing, ask: Does this actually need to happen quickly?

DAY 2

Build a Gratitude Jar

I'll be honest, gratitude has never come particularly naturally to me. I've always been someone who looks forward, what's next, what's the next challenge, where are we going, what can I build, what's the next adventure?

I've never been especially sentimental either, I don't naturally spend hours looking through old photographs or keeping boxes full of things from the past. I moved around quite a bit growing up and perhaps some of it came from that, keep moving, look forward, next thing.

That part of me has been incredibly useful. It's helped me build things and it's helped me through difficult periods, when something goes wrong my natural response is usually to start looking for where I'm going next, but every strength has a shadow.

And I've realised that if you're always looking towards the next thing, you can become remarkably bad at noticing the thing you're currently living. Someone very special to me introduced me to a ridiculously simple practice that helped with this, a gratitude jar. There's nothing complicated about it, you get a jar and when something happens that genuinely makes you feel grateful, you write it on a small piece of paper, fold it up and put it inside. That's it. Then at a later time, perhaps when you are not feeling so great, open it and have a read. It's remarkable.

One of my favourite notes simply said: Listening to Ava and Alfie laughing together. We weren't on an incredible holiday, there was no major family milestone, my children were laughing together and I noticed it, felt it, so I wrote it down.

Then I forgot about it.

Months later, I went through some of the notes in the jar and found that one, and suddenly I could hear them again, not perfectly, obviously.

The note brought the moment back, and I realised how easily it would otherwise have disappeared. I felt flooded with love and I carried that feeling through my day – in how I showed up.

That's what I love about this practice. It catches ordinary life.

We're quite good at recording the big things. Birthdays, weddings, holidays and Christmas. The first day of school. Someone holding a trophy. Everyone stands together and somebody takes a photograph because we've collectively agreed: This is a memory, but most of life isn't about that.

You could be making dinner and your kids are laughing in the next room. Sometimes the dog puts his head on your lap.

You have a cup of coffee outside and the sun hits your face.

Sometimes your mum phones.

You could be driving somewhere with a mate and something makes you both laugh so much you can't speak.

Nobody stops and says: "Philip, pay attention. You're going to miss this one day." It just happens, then life moves on.

That's why I've started thinking of gratitude less as forcing myself to feel positive and more as noticing what I don't want to miss. That feels much more natural to me.

Gratitude practices have been linked with improvements in wellbeing, but gratitude is not a cure for pain and it should never become a way of pretending life is wonderful when it isn't. Lots of things can be true at once. Humans are complex.

You can be grieving and grateful, angry and grateful, frightened and grateful, you can have had a genuinely awful day and still notice that somebody made you a cup of tea. One doesn't cancel the other. Gratitude isn't: "Stop complaining. Look how lucky you are." I am no fan of that.

Pain doesn't disappear because somebody else has it worse.

Gratitude just asks whether pain is the only thing present, sometimes it is, often it isn't. Perhaps that's why the jar has become meaningful to me, it doesn't ask me to stop looking forward.

I'm probably always going to be someone thinking about the next project, challenge or adventure.

A gratitude jar just gives me somewhere to store the moments I might otherwise leave behind, because I'm increasingly aware that some of the things I currently take for granted won't always be available to me.

People get older, children grow up, relationships change, dogs don't live long enough, places disappear and ordinary life moves on.

One day, some completely unremarkable Tuesday you're living right now might be exactly the day you'd give anything to visit again, so every now and then, notice it while you're still inside it - Then put it in the jar.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Build Your Gratitude Jar

Get a good physical jar: something you like, something worth keeping, and something you are happy to leave somewhere visible.

At the end of today, write down 1-3 specific moments from the day that genuinely stopped you in your tracks and made you feel grateful. Write each moment on a separate piece of paper, fold it, and place it in the jar.

These are not generic statements about what you think you should be grateful for. Capture actual moments: a look, a laugh, sunlight, a conversation, a kindness, a meal, a dog greeting you, something unexpectedly beautiful.

Continue this practice through the 42 days if you wish. Do not open the jar during the journey. On Day 42, you will be invited to open it and read what you collected.

What happened when you deliberately looked for something to be grateful for?

Carry forward: when a moment stops you in your tracks and makes you feel grateful, catch it and put it in the jar.

DAY 3

Empty Your Mind Before You Sleep

People are forever telling us to journal.

"You should journal" sounds wonderfully wise, but faced with a blank page at the end of the day, where exactly do you begin? Mine has always been a bit messy and haphazard and truthfully, still is.

I did eventually find a method completely by accident, and thanks to a mate being a twat. Take a journal and divide the page in two or use two pages.

On one side, write down the emotional stuff. On the other, write down the practical stuff. That's basically it. The practical side is easy.

Phone someone tomorrow, book an appointment, reply to an email, buy milk, pay the bill you've forgotten about twice. Whatever your brain keeps reminding you that you absolutely must not forget in the morning, put it on the page.

Then there's the other side. That's where you put the things you're feeling: something somebody said to you, something you're worried about, anger, grief, embarrassment, fear, a conversation you're replaying, something you can't quite understand yet. The important thing is that you don't have to solve any of it. You're just putting it somewhere.

I discovered how useful this could be one evening when I'd already written my to-do list for the following day.

Just before bed, I received a message from a mate I'd known for years and I think he may have been drunk.

It was pretty abusive, it usually is when it's about the football team I support, my beloved Spurs.

It really made me angry.

My immediate instinct was to react and start a cascade of replies that would keep me up all night.

A terrible idea because I was tired, angry and emotionally activated, so I looked at the journal instead.

The page opposite my to-do list was empty, so I wrote his name.

Underneath it I wrote:

Twat

That was my emotional journalling practice.

Very profound.

But something interesting happened.

I laughed. And once I'd written it down, I realised I didn't actually have to do anything else it could all wait till tomorrow.

I wasn't pretending I wasn't angry, forgiving him or working out what his behaviour meant and what the perfect mature response might be. I was angry, Spurs were actually doing really well too. It felt like such an injustice. Tomorrow's Philip could deal with it.

That was the beginning of a practice I've used ever since, although writing this now reminds me that I've recently stopped, so I'll put that in my gratitude jar that I've been reminded by this book.

I've found there's a huge difference between feeling something and believing you have to do something about that feeling immediately. There is space

There is Ma – the in between.

You can be furious and not send the message, frightened and not make the decision, hurt and not start the argument. You may just need somewhere to put the feeling until you've slept.

The practical side works in a similar way for me.

My brain is very good at remembering things at exactly the wrong moment. I get into bed and suddenly remember the phone call I need to make tomorrow, then another thing, then something I need to buy, then I need to message my Mum.

I don't want to forget any of them, part of my brain's attention keeps rehearsing them. Writing them down means I don't have to hold them in my head.

There is research suggesting that expressive writing can help with emotional processing, and there is also evidence that writing a specific to-do list before bed can help some people fall asleep faster. I originally knew none of that. I just had a mate that was being a drunk twat, and I'm grateful got that.

I noticed that I slept better when I stopped taking the entire day to bed with me.

The practice is about, not solving your life in the every evening when it's better to be getting sleepy.

Closing the day.

The jobs have somewhere to live.

The feelings have somewhere to live, and you are allowed to go to the land of nod.

Morning changes things. Not always. Some problems are still problems when the sun comes up, but you've processed and you are rested.

That initial emotional surge has often passed. Something that felt catastrophic at eleven o'clock sometimes looks considerably less dramatic at seven in the morning, you've had a dose of Ma.

If it still matters, you can deal with it then.

A small piece of Ma between feeling and action.

A space where nothing has to happen yet. I've come to value that space enormously, because some of the things I've regretted most in life have come from what I did too quickly because of what I felt in the moment, being a tad rash.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

Empty Your Mind Before You Sleep

Before bed, divide the page in two. Put feelings and emotional material on the left. Put practical tasks and reminders on the right. Do not solve either side tonight. Let the page hold it. Close the book and sleep.

WHAT I'M FEELING	WHAT NEEDS DOING

Nothing on this page needs solving tonight.

Continue this practice on later nights whenever it creates more Ma for you.

Carry forward: When your mind is crowded at night, put it on the page instead of taking it to bed.

DAY 4

Return to the Child Who Knew Joy

When people feel lost, we tend to ask them where they want to go next. Sometimes I think it's worth asking where they came from. Go back far enough, before work, mortgages, relationships, children, responsibilities and all the other things that gradually fill an adult life, and you'll usually find things you did for absolutely no sensible reason. You did them because you loved them. As a kid, you don't need somebody to explain the psychological benefits of play.

You just play. Then we grow up and somewhere along the way a lot of us stop. One of the things I loved was football.

I loved playing it, and for years it was simply part of my life.

Unfortunately, my knees now have other ideas. I've got arthritis in them and playing football properly isn't really an option anymore.

For a while, I thought that meant I'd simply lost something I loved. Then I started asking myself a slightly different question.

What did I actually love about football? The obvious answer was football.

Except when I really thought about it, that wasn't quite true.

I loved moving freely and competing, but more than anything, I loved everything that happened around the game - the lads, the changing room, winding each other up, banter laughing.

A feeling of being part of a team, trying hard together and then talking absolute nonsense afterwards and ribbing each other.

I really missed it.

Once I understood that, something changed. I didn't need to somehow find a way of making my knees twenty years younger so I could recreate football. I needed to recreate what football had given me.

Find the feelings.

It's in other places now, training with mates in the gym gives me that banter and connection.

Walking, adventures, travel, sauna and sea swims give me the feeling of freedom

Doing difficult things with other people and laughing while we're doing them.

It's not football as we know it Clive, but some of them give me the same feeling - an important distinction.

When we look back at childhood it's easy to become nostalgic about the activity itself.

I used to paint, climb trees, ride my bike everywhere, build dens, play outside until somebody shouted that dinner was ready and then adulthood arrives and we can assume those things belong to a person who no longer exists.

Maybe the activity isn't what you need to recover, perhaps it's what was underneath it. If you spent your childhood exploring woods, maybe what you loved was adventure. If you were constantly drawing, perhaps it was creativity, team sports might have been belonging or competition, taking things apart might have been curiosity, building imaginary worlds perhaps freedom.

The form can change, the feeling doesn't have to.

I think this matters because adults become very good at doing things that are useful, work, exercise, cleaning the house, taking children where they need to go, and trying to pay bills by clicking on all the images that have bicycles in them (endlessly).

We can build entire lives around being useful, especially with others in mind like kids and work.

One day we wonder why everything feels a bit flat.

Joy doesn't always need to achieve anything and neither does play.

You don't need to justify enjoying something because it's productive, healthy, profitable or part of your personal development.

"I love doing this" is enough.

If you've forgotten what that feels like, your childhood may contain some clues.

Don't try to become eight years old again. That person has gone, and that's okay, but some of the things that made them come alive may still be waiting for you, so go and find them and give me a smile next time you click an image of a lorry instead of a bike on a bloody captcha me called – thingy

TODAY'S PRACTICE

FOLLOW THE JOY BACK

What did I love doing?	What did it give me?

Possible clues: Freedom · Adventure · Creativity · Belonging · Competition · Movement · Curiosity · Nature · Imagination · Laughter · Building · Exploring · Making · Connection

What feelings appear more than once?

Which of those feelings is missing, or doesn't appear often enough, in your life now?

BRING ONE BACK

Choose one feeling you identified above and find an adult way to experience it today for at least twenty minutes. It does not need to improve your fitness, make money, develop you, impress anyone or achieve anything. Do it because you enjoy it.

Carry forward: Protect something in your life that has no purpose beyond making you feel alive.

DAY 5

Visit the Graveyard

A very dear friend of mine enjoys walking round graveyards.

We go away together a few times every year and we always have to bloody visit one.

For a while I just accepted this and walked around with him not particularly “feeling it”

If somebody suggested a nice walk, a pub or perhaps somewhere by the sea, I'd understand.

After Dad passed I completely changed my mind and perspective. I did it around Dad's place of rest, but I also did it subsequently with my old mate and I thanked him for the practice

We walked slowly and started reading the stones. Names, dates, and ages.

Some people had lived into their eighties and nineties.

Others had died incredibly young. Some of the graves went back hundreds of years, and I found myself doing the maths. This person lived for 42 years. This one had 76. This child barely got started. Two dates with an entire human existence somewhere between them.

The in between – Ma

The strange thing was that I didn't find it depressing, I found it incredibly peaceful. Standing there, I started thinking about all the things that consume us while we're alive, work, money, arguments, embarrassing things we've said, whether somebody likes us, whether we're successful enough or ahead or behind, the email that ruined our morning, the person who cut us up in traffic, the thing somebody said three weeks ago that we're still replaying in the shower.

When you stand in front of a gravestone from two hundred years ago and whatever that person was worried about on a Tuesday afternoon is gone.

We don't know what most of these people did for work or what they owned.

In many cases, all that's left for a stranger to see is a name and a couple of dates.

You would think that would make life feel insignificant. For me, it did the opposite. It made some of my problems feel insignificant.

That's a very different thing.

There's a wonderful freedom in remembering that your life is temporary, you get to reconsider what matters.

The Grim Reaper has a way of stripping away some of the nonsense.

If my time here is limited, do I really want to spend this much of it with another evening staring at my phone, or keep postponing seeing that person I love?

Or spend years doing work I hate because I'm frightened of changing direction?

Do I actually care about winning this argument?

Sometimes the answer will still be yes, some things are worth fighting for, but plenty aren't, it all seems a bit daft.

I've come to think of life a little like being the custodian of a house.

You live there for a while, you care for it, change things, damage things and repair things, fill it with people and memories, then eventually somebody else gets a turn.

What's the saying?

"I don't want to be the richest guy in the graveyard"

Perhaps that's a useful way of thinking about our time here too.

I don't particularly care whether my name is remembered hundreds of years from now.

I care whether the people who shared this bit of time with me were better for having known me.

Did my children know I loved them, did my mates know I valued them, did the clients I worked with leave feeling better?

Did I create, did I help, and did I really squeeze the juice out of life?

Those questions matter more to me than whether some stranger reads my name on a stone in two hundred years, and strangely, that's why I now understand my friend's love of graveyards.

They're quiet.

Nobody in there is rushing, nobody is checking their phone, and nobody is trying to impress anybody.

You walk among thousands of reminders that time is moving whether you're paying attention to it or not

Then you walk back through the gate.

Still alive.

So go and live.



That's the important bit. You get to leave. And for however long you've got, you get another go at deciding what matters.

Now Put a Number on It

There's another exercise I want you to do while all of this is still slightly uncomfortable. Take your age now and choose an age you might reasonably hope to live to.

Eighty, eighty-five or ninety. Whatever feels reasonable to you. Nobody knows when they're going to die.

This isn't a prediction and I don't want you becoming weirdly obsessed with the number. It's just a way of making something abstract feel real. Subtract your age now from that number. That gives you roughly the number of years you might have left.

Now multiply that by 365, those are your possible days. If you want to make it even more uncomfortable, multiply that number by 24, those are your possible hours.

None of them are promised, you might get far more, you might get far fewer, that's the whole point.

Now work out roughly how many days you've already lived and put the two numbers beside each other, look at them for a moment.

This isn't necessarily about trying to become productive with every remaining hour, quite the opposite.

Waste an afternoon with your kids, sit in the sun, have the long lunch, walk the dog, laugh with your mates, at times do absolutely nothing

That is not wasting your life. What I'm interested in is how much of it disappears without us ever choosing where it went.

Look at your number and ask yourself honestly: If this really was roughly what I had left, would I spend it the way I'm spending it now?

You don't need to panic or blow your life up, you just need to notice.

You're still here.

You walked back through the gate so spend the gift of time accordingly.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

PART ONE · GO THERE

Visit a graveyard, churchyard, memorial garden or another quiet place where mortality becomes real. No headphones. No phone. Spend at least ten minutes walking. Read names, dates and ages. Do not try to manufacture an insight. Just be there.

PART TWO · COUNT THE DAYS

My age now: _____

An age I might reasonably hope to reach: _____

Possible years remaining: _____

Possible days remaining: _____

Approximate days I've already lived: _____

DAYS LIVED

POSSIBLE DAYS REMAINING

PART THREE · SPEND ACCORDINGLY

What am I currently giving too much of my limited time to?

What matters to me that I'm postponing?

What is one small thing I can do about that now?

You're still here. Spend accordingly.

Carry forward: Let mortality clarify, not frighten, your choices.

DAY 6

The Deathbed Meditation

There is a version of you who could probably give you some very good advice. Unfortunately, you can't actually speak to them. Annoyingly it's you at the end of your life.

I've used versions of this exercise whenever I've found myself stuck between what feels comfortable now and what I suspect I'll wish I'd done later. It can be uncomfortable, because none of us particularly enjoys imagining our own death, but I've found it useful.

Most of the decisions that occupy us today are being made by the person experiencing them today.

That sounds obvious, but it's important. Today's Philip doesn't want the difficult conversation. Today's Philip might not fancy going to the gym and he might not have perspective.

Today's Philip can convince himself there will be another opportunity to take the trip, see the person, start the project or say the thing. The older version of me might see those decisions very differently.

People who have worked with the dying have often written about how priorities change near the end of life.

Bronnie Ware, for example, wrote about recurring themes she heard from people in her care: living according to other people's expectations, working too much, failing to express feelings, losing contact with friends and not allowing themselves more happiness.

Regrets usually aren't created by one enormous decision.

They're accumulated.

One evening you stay at work instead of going home, or one friendship you keep meaning to pick back up you don't.

One conversation you avoid because it feels awkward.

You tell yourself you'll take the trip next year, you'll say the thing another time, then another ordinary day comes along and you do pretty much the same thing again, and repeat.

Years are made out of days like that, so every now and then, I think it's worth borrowing perspective from the person at the other end of them.

Imagine yourself very old.

You've been lucky enough to have a long life. Your body is tired and you know you're approaching the end.

There isn't anything left to prove.

Nobody's social-media feed matters.

The argument you had decades ago has long since disappeared and you're simply looking back.

What do you think you'll care about?

I can't answer that for you, that's the point. For me, I suspect I'll care enormously about whether my children knew I loved them and whether I was actually present for their lives rather than simply providing for them.

I'll care about the people I loved, whether I used whatever abilities I had to create something worthwhile and help people, the adventures, and probably whether I laughed enough. Did I experience those moments of Ma fully?

There are plenty of things that feel important today that I strongly suspect the old man in that bed couldn't care about.

That's useful information.

It doesn't mean we should live recklessly because we're going to die. Quite the opposite.

Our time deserves some thought.

I also don't think your imaginary older self should or would become another person who criticises you.

That's the last thing most of us need.

When I picture mine, I don't imagine him looking back at me thinking: You idiot. Look at all the things you're getting wrong. He knows what I know.

Old Philip remembers the fear because he was the one who felt it. He remembers losing people. He remembers the mistakes.

He understands why some decisions were difficult, but he also knows what happened afterwards.

That gives him perspective I don't have yet, so sometimes I ask him: What am I making too complicated? What am I frightened of that won't matter eventually? What do I need to do while I still can? Then I listen to the old codger.

Obviously, I'm not literally receiving information from the future, but I'm changing the position from which I'm looking at the present.

Sometimes you need to move further away from a problem before you can see its actual size, and there aren't many places further away than your deathbed.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

1 · BRING YESTERDAY'S NUMBER WITH YOU

Yesterday you put a rough number on the days you might have left. Don't calculate it again. Look back at what you wrote, or simply bring the number to mind. Sit with it for a moment. None of those days are guaranteed.

2 · THE DEATHBED MEDITATION

Settle somewhere you will not be disturbed. Close your eyes and allow your breathing to slow.

Imagine you have been fortunate enough to live a long life. You are very old now and approaching the end. There is nothing left to prove.

Notice the room. Your body. Your breathing. Let yourself be there. Feel it.

Now look back across your life without judgement.

Let people, relationships, work, adventures, risks taken and avoided, things said and unsaid, ordinary moments, love and laughter come to mind, see it, hear it, take in the scent, feel its textures

Ask yourself: What mattered? What did I give far too much energy to? Who or what needed more of me? What did I keep postponing? What was I frightened of that eventually did not matter? What am I glad I had the courage to do?

Finally ask: What do you want the younger you to know while there is still time?

Then be quiet. Let the answer come, let your older self talk.

LISTEN INSTEAD

If you would prefer to be guided through The Deathbed Meditation, an accompanying audio version can be used with this practice.

3 • COME BACK AND WRITE

What did the old You, share with You?

WHILE I STILL CAN...

I will _____

Take one concrete step within the next 24 hours.

Carry forward: Ask the old you. Act on the instruction from your older self.

DAY 7

The Blue Line Day

My friend and I have a phrase that we've used for years, I have a feeling it was from Nigel Adkin's the football manager.

A Blue Line Day.

We've been close friends for a long time, we speak almost every day, we know what's happening in each other's lives, support each other when things get difficult and, perhaps most importantly, have an incredible ability to make each other laugh.

Occasionally one of us will have a day where everything just goes completely and utterly pear-shaped.

You know those days, one thing goes wrong, then another, the car breaks down, something happens at work, you have an argument, lose something, an unexpected bill arrives, you spill your coffee, then you get some awful news, Spurs lose yet again.

Then, just when you think surely that's enough for one day, something else happens. There comes a point where continuing to fight the day becomes ridiculous.

That's when one of us might say: "Blue line it." That's it. Day's done, I'm spent.

You Are Allowed to Give Up on Today

We're constantly told not to give up. Keep going, push through, stay positive, turn adversity into opportunity, find the lesson, get back on the horse. And most of the time, resilience is an incredibly useful quality. However, you don't have to win every single day and often that's the contrast that makes the wins worthwhile and hold meaning.

You can't have sweet without the sour. Sometimes the most intelligent thing you can do is recognise: I'm done.

Not with your entire life, not with your goals, not with the person you're trying to become, just with today. There is a huge difference. The instinct when everything starts going wrong is often to fight harder. We resist what has happened, replay conversations, think about what somebody should have said, wish we'd responded differently.

Become angry about the car, the weather, the traffic, the email, the person who let us down. Our mind keeps demanding: This day shouldn't have happened like this. Except it did.

Acceptance doesn't mean liking something. It doesn't mean approving of what somebody did. It doesn't mean deciding that something unfair was actually okay. Acceptance simply means ending the argument with reality. This happened. That's it. Once something has happened, no amount of mental resistance can travel backwards through time and remove it.

There are things within our control and things outside it.

We can influence our actions, our decisions and what we do next, but much of what happens around us belongs to life, and life occasionally produces an absolute mess.

Draw the Blue Line and just smile – if you don't laugh you'll cry, or maybe cry and laugh and maybe collapse into bed. Whatever feels right.

The next time you have one of those days, get a piece of paper. Write down everything that went wrong. Don't make it profound, don't analyse your childhood, don't look for seven lessons hidden within the experience, don't try to make yourself grateful for it. Just write it down: car broke down, argument with partner, lost my wallet, work was awful, didn't train, ate rubbish, felt awful, whatever happened.

Get it out of your head and onto the page. Then take a blue pen or marker.

Underneath everything you've written, draw one thick blue line across the page. Everything above that line belongs to today. Underneath it, write four words: Tomorrow is a new day. Nothing else. Don't write tomorrow's strategy, that's not for now.

Tomorrow can deal with tomorrow. Today is finished.

Let Yourself Off the Hook

Once you've drawn the line, stop trying to optimise yourself. Go to bed early, have a bath, watch your favourite film, put on something that makes you laugh, order some food, eat a bag of chips, lie on the sofa, call somebody who makes you feel good, do absolutely nothing useful.

There are days when your nervous system doesn't need another challenge, it needs permission, permission to stop, permission to say: Enough.

Rest isn't always something we earn by having a productive day, sometimes it's what prevents a terrible day becoming a terrible week.

There is one rule I would add, when you're having a Blue Line Day, be very careful about making enormous decisions.

Don't decide your relationship is over because you've had a catastrophic argument at ten o'clock at night. Your business is a failure. Don't send the message you've been furiously writing for the last forty minutes or resign from your job. Definitely don't decide what your entire life means.

You're tired. You're activated. You've had enough.

Draw the line first. Then see what is still true tomorrow.

You're not postponing responsibility. You're postponing the reaction until you're in a better place to respond.

Morning gives you distance.

The thing that happened might not have changed, but you have.

You don't have to deal with everything tonight, just blue line it, and tomorrow is a new blank canvas to go again.

TODAY'S PRACTICE

DRAW THE BLUE LINE

Day 3 gave thoughts and tasks somewhere to live overnight. The Blue Line uses the same principle when the whole day has simply become too much.

WHAT I AM DONE CARRYING FROM TODAY

Take a blue pen or marker and draw one thick blue line across the page below what you have written. No analysis. No forced lesson. No recovery plan.

Tomorrow is a new day.

Do not make major decisions below the Blue Line. Rest. Let the day end. Do something that asks nothing more of you.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING

It's a new day.

Say it simply and deliberately before you carry yesterday back into today. Later in the book, the self-talk work will return to this phrase as an example of choosing the language that frames your state.

Carry forward: When a day has simply been a Blue Line Day, blue line it. Always end with "Tomorrow is a new day." Begin the following morning with "It's a new day."

MOVEMENT ONE REVIEW

WAKE UP

Before you move on, stop.

Over the last seven days, you've slowed down, practiced gratitude, emptied some of what you've been carrying, looked backwards towards childhood and forwards towards death, and learned that sometimes a day simply needs to end.

Don't rush into the next movement. Give yourself a little Ma.

That might mean the rest of the day, or a full day off if you need one.

The pause is part of the practice too - that's Ma.

LOOK BACK

What has surprised you most about yourself during these seven days?

What have you noticed that you weren't paying enough attention to before?

What are you giving too much of your time or energy to?

What do you want more of while you're here?

Is there anything you now know you need to do, say, begin or stop?

WHAT WILL YOU CARRY?

Not everything needs to become another habit.

Ma isn't about filling your life with more things to do. It's about creating enough space to notice what actually helps, tick what you wish to continue:

- ☐ Dad's Pace - slow down when something doesn't actually need rushing.
- ☐ The Gratitude Jar - continue adding 1-3 moments that stop you in your tracks and make you feel grateful.
- ☐ Empty Your Mind Before Sleep - use the two-column journal when your mind needs somewhere to put things down.
- ☐ Follow the Joy Back - protect something that makes you feel alive simply because you love doing it.
- ☐ Remember the Clock - let mortality clarify rather than frighten your choices.
- ☐ Ask the Old You - borrow perspective from the person at the other end of your life.
- ☐ The Blue Line - when a day has simply been a Blue Line Day, let it end.

CHOOSE WHAT STAYS

The one most important practice I want to continue regularly:

One tool I want to remember when I need it:

What have these seven days shown me about how I want to live?

If I ignored what I've learned this week, what would I regret?

These seven days weren't about fixing your whole life. They were about interrupting the automatic state you were living from long enough to notice what was already there: your pace, your attention, your joy, your time and the things you keep carrying after they are over. When that state shifts, even slightly, space begins to appear.

That space is Ma.

CLOSE THE BOOK.

Don't immediately start Movement Two.

Go for a walk. Make a cup of tea. Sit outside. Do something ordinary.

Leave some space between what you've just learned and what comes next. If you need a full day before you come back, take it. The next numbered day begins when you return.

間

Leave some space.

