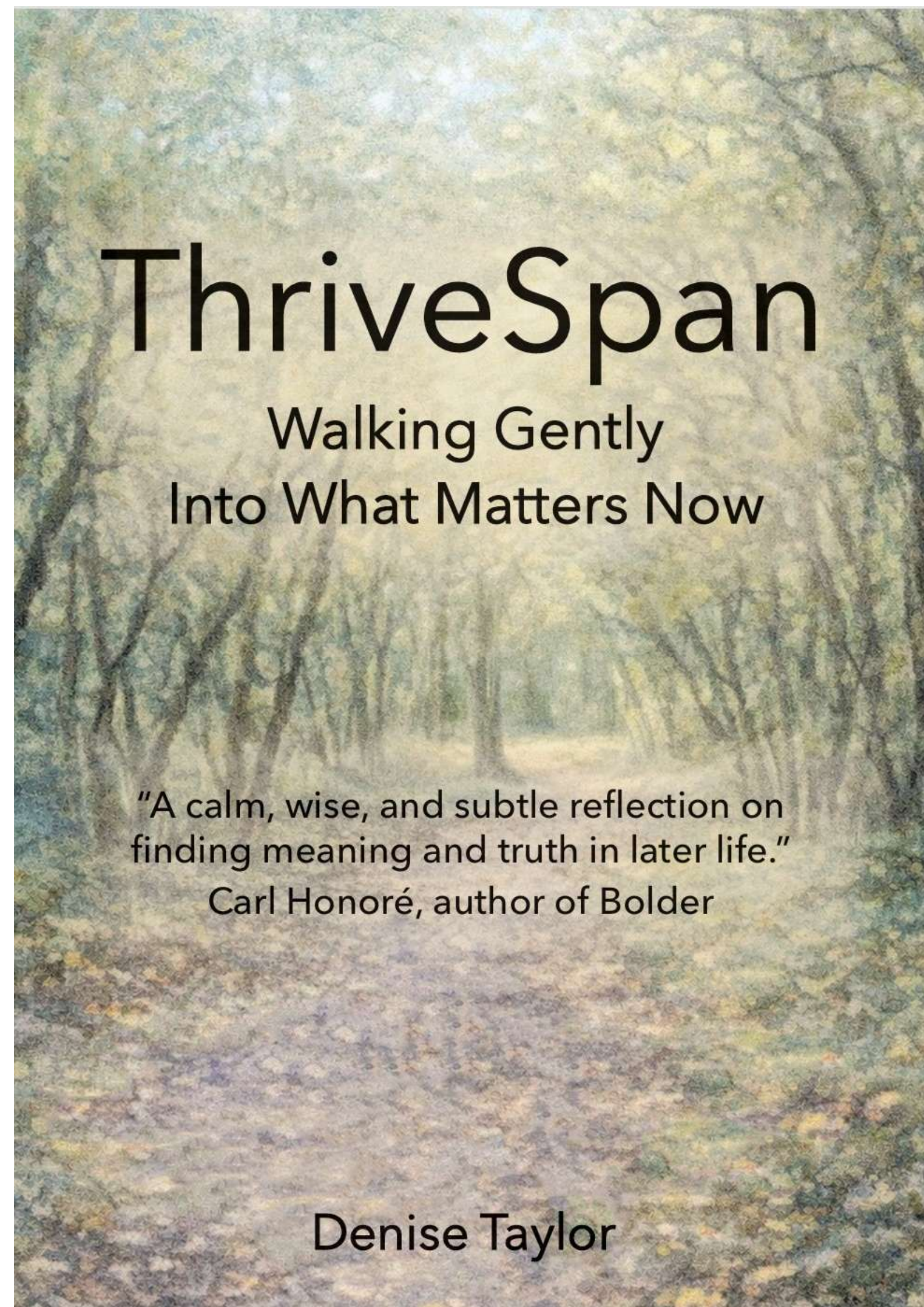




ThriveSpan

Walking Gently
Into What Matters Now

"A calm, wise, and subtle reflection on
finding meaning and truth in later life."

Carl Honoré, author of *Bolder*

Denise Taylor

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

EARLY READER REFLECTIONS

"I feel I have found a new companion. Someone who will walk alongside me, gently challenge me, and hold me."

— *Jim*

"What this book ultimately offered was not urgency, but possibility. It planted seeds rather than issuing demands."

— *Eloise*

"I love the idea that later life is not a continuing decline but a new and exciting stage — a way of becoming more fully yourself."

— *Gilly*

"This book instantly felt like 'ah — that's where I am.' The tree imagery and metaphor speak to me deeply."

— *Linda*

A gentle, soulful companion for later life. No prescriptions, just space and perspective to help you be fully yourself.

— *Richard*

"It wasn't prescriptive. It wasn't filled with models. It speaks to you where you are now."

— *James*

"There is a gentle, wise voice throughout; at times it feels as though you are sitting in the woods around a fire, in quiet conversation."

— *Amanda*

THRIVESPAN

WALKING GENTLY INTO WHAT MATTERS NOW

Denise Taylor

First published 2026
by Brook House Press

Copyright © 2026 Denise Taylor

The right of Denise Taylor to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

No part of this book may be used for training artificial intelligence systems without the express written permission of the publisher.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

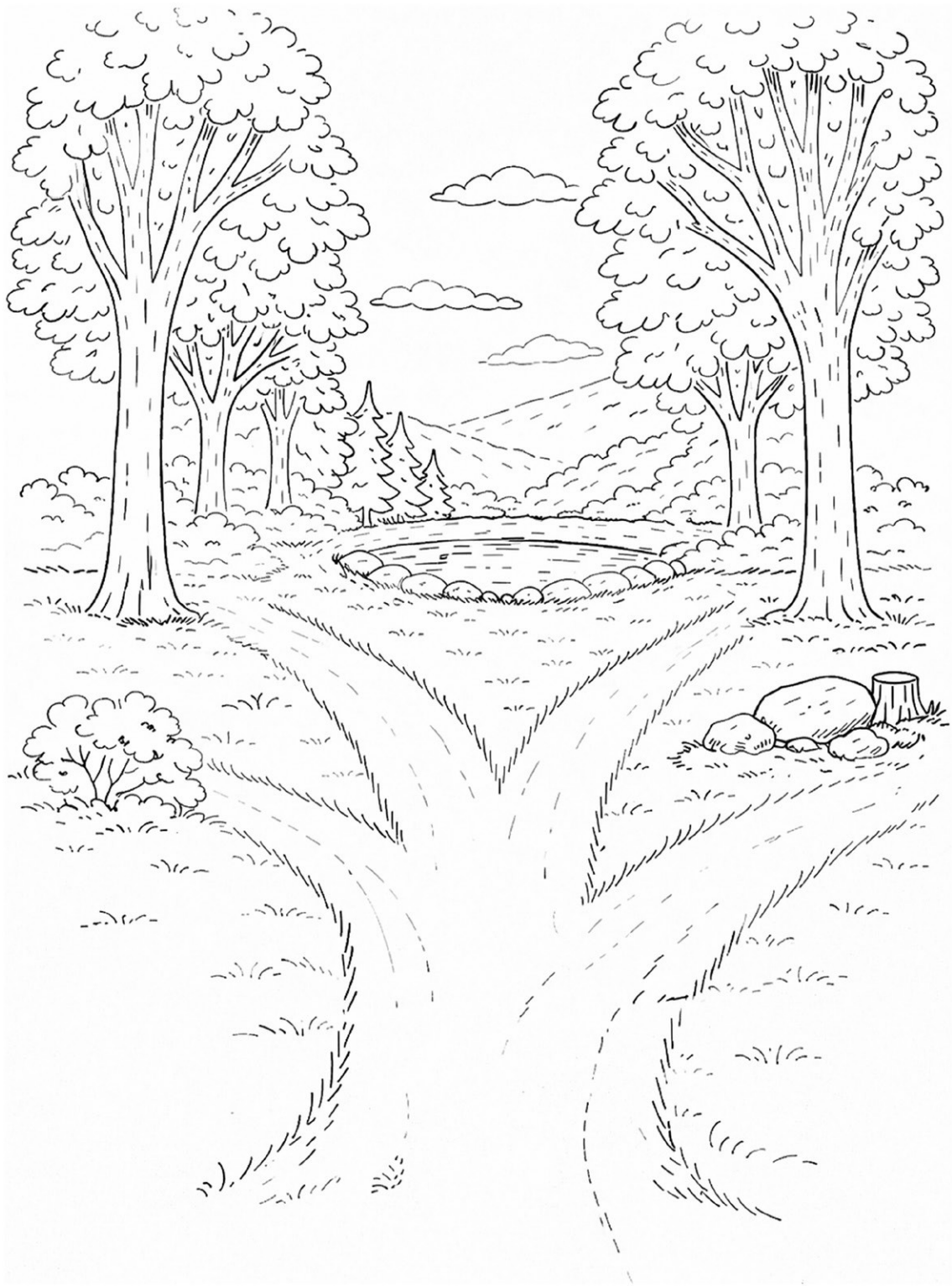
ISBN 978-0-9561755-3-3 (print edition)

Cover image: Denise Taylor
Typeset in Optima by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India

Every effort has been made to trace and acknowledge sources of quoted material. Any errors or omissions are unintentional and will be corrected in future editions.

This book has been produced using environmentally responsible printing and distribution practices wherever possible.

Access the companion website:
www.denisetaylor.co.uk/thrivespanbook



CONTENTS

Author's Note	x
Preface: Why ThriveSpan Now	xii
A Quiet Threshold	xviii
Who This Book Is For	xix
A Forest of Possibility	xxi
How to Use This Book	xxii
Orientation: The ThriveSpan Three	xxiii
A Final Invitation	xxvi
 Interlude 1. The ThriveSpan Root System: The Life Beneath	 1
 PATH ONE: SELF AND WELL-BEING	 5
 1 Well-Being and Rhythm: The Ground We Stand On in Later Life	 7
 Interlude 2. Living Well with the Body We Have	 41
 2 Autonomy and Agency: A Gentle Return to Shaping Life on Your Own Terms	 45
 Interlude 3. The Room That Is Always There	 57
 3 Inner Life, Meaning, and Spiritual Grounding: Living in Rhythm with Your Deeper Self	 59

Interlude 4. Roots and Branches: From Inner Ground to Outer Reach	73
PATH TWO: CONNECTION AND CONTRIBUTION	77
4 Belonging: Reweaving Connection in Ways That Fit Who We Are Now	79
Interlude 5. Belonging: Standing Ground While Staying Open	95
5 Contribution and Service: Making a Difference Beyond Work	97
Interlude 6. Seasons of Self: Trusting Life's Rhythms in Later Life	113
6 Legacy and Continuity: What Remains and What You'll Leave Behind	117
Interlude 7. With the End in Mind	133
PATH THREE: EXPLORATION AND FULFILMENT	135
7 Purpose, Growth, and Becoming: Growing Into What Matters	137
Interlude 8. Learning to Be New Again	155
8 Creativity and Expression: Letting the Inner Life Speak	157
Interlude 9. The Art of Creating Without a Goal	165
9 Joy and Playfulness: Allowing Lightness and Delight	167
Interlude 10. The Joyspan We Didn't Plan For	177
10 When the Path Changes: Flexibility and Resilience in Later Life	179

Conclusion: Living Your ThriveSpan Life	186
Resources for Your ThriveSpan Journey	189
Afterword: A Personal Note	190
About the Author	192
Stay Connected	193
Further Reading and Sources by Chapter	194
Index	197

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There's a quiet question that echoes through many lives in midlife and beyond.

I've heard it from clients on the cusp of retirement, from friends easing out of long careers, and now, more often, from within myself:

What now?

What now, as the scaffolding of daily work falls away?

What now, as we face more time but not always more clarity?

For decades, we've been offered only a handful of stories about retirement: one of endless leisure, another of inevitable decline. More recently, a third has emerged: keep going, keep striving, don't retire at all. But many of us want something else. Not just rest. Not more of the same. Something deeper.

This book begins in that space.

Later life, I believe, can be a time of renewal and richness. Not just in health or happiness but in the deeper sense the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, a life grounded in meaning, character, and truth.

We don't often get taught how to arrive here. Most guides focus on finance or productivity. Few speak to the quiet shifts of identity, purpose, or presence.

ThriveSpan grew from that gap.

After years of coaching people through midlife transitions, and later, researching meaningful later life for my doctorate, I began to see what really sustains us:

Connection, autonomy, joy, and a sense of contribution.

Not endless reinvention, but a return to what matters.

My own life shifted too.

The pandemic slowed down my consultancy work and gave me space to focus on doctoral research. Around the same time, I bought four acres of woodland. In that quiet space, I walked. I listened. I began to let go of long-held roles and ask different questions:

What gives me life now?

Where am I still growing?

This book is the result.

Not a manual, but a companion. A way of exploring later life through presence, meaning, and gentle action.

Most people I meet aren't trying to fade away.

They're evolving, quietly or boldly, but always in ways that feel true.

They want purpose. They want rhythm. They want joy.

That's why I created ThriveSpan.

PREFACE

Why ThriveSpan Now

Later life is often discussed in terms of habits, positivity, or “doing the right things,” yet the emotional and existential work of this stage is far more complex. Many older adults quietly sense this. They feel the loosening of old identities, the wider questions that emerge as the scaffolding of work falls away, and the subtle shifts in pace and orientation. Yet much of the world still talks about ageing in narrow terms: productivity, fitness, reinvention, decline.

ThriveSpan begins in the space between those two realities.

What follows is not another book urging you to stay upbeat, stay youthful, or stay endlessly active. Later life is not a performance to maintain. Nor is it a technical problem to be solved with enough exercise, mindsets, biomarkers, or motivation. It is a stage with its own depth, shadows, freedom, and truth. This book offers a quieter way of understanding what unfolds as we grow older, centred on meaning, steadiness, connection, and a more grounded relationship with the years ahead.

The older I become, the more I see that this stage is not simply an extension of midlife. It has its own emotional texture, its own questions about identity, belonging, contribution, and truthfulness. And yet, culturally, we are underprepared for it. We have inherited stories that do not match the lives we are actually living.

Research Insight: Expectations and Lived Reality

Recent national research reveals a striking gap between how younger adults imagine later life and how older adults actually experience it. While only 30% of adults under sixty-five expect to age well, nearly half of those over sixty-five report they are ageing extremely or very well. Younger adults are more likely to feel worried (67%) than excited (51%) about their later years, yet two-thirds of older adults describe feeling optimistic about their lives most of the time.

The biggest differences in well-being appear not from age itself but from income and health. Among older adults, those in higher income brackets are far more likely to report ageing well (61%) compared to those with lower incomes (39%). These findings reinforce the need to approach ageing with nuance rather than fear, recognising that the quality of later life is shaped more by circumstances and resources than by stereotypes about decline.

Source: Lin, L., & Horowitz, J. M. (2025). How Americans are thinking about aging. Pew Research Center.

WHY THIS MOMENT MATTERS

We are living through a time when the old age stages no longer fit. As longevity reshapes every generation, the boundaries between youth, midlife, and older adulthood have grown far more fluid. People in their seventies return to study; grandparents work alongside their grandchildren's peers; young adults care for much older parents while building their own early careers. Later life can no longer be understood in isolation. It is part of a continuous life course, dynamic and interdependent, shaped by culture as much as biology. ThriveSpan emerges from this shifting landscape. It sees Olderhood not as an endpoint, but as a phase shaped by purpose, participation, and relationships.

Public conversations are trying to catch up. Governments worry about demographics, pensions, and productivity. Organisations frame ageing in terms of workforce retention and economic pressures. Longevity science offers extraordinary

breakthroughs and an optimism that would have sounded like science fiction even a decade ago.

But none of these conversations truly describe what it feels like to move into later life.

You may already be familiar with the growing language of later life: healthspan, wealthspan, brainspan, joyspan, and others. These terms can be helpful in isolation. But taken together, they can fragment experience, encouraging people to manage ageing as a series of separate projects.

People tell me they are not looking for more strategies. They are looking for understanding. They want a way of seeing themselves that feels humane, grounded, and real.

This is the world ThriveSpan seeks to illuminate.

WHAT THRIVESPAN IS, AND ISN'T

ThriveSpan is not another framework aimed at helping people “age well” through endless positivity, discipline, or doing more. It is not a guide to defying age, outperforming decline, or maintaining invincibility into later life.

ThriveSpan offers a different lens. Rather than asking how to stay ageless, it asks how we might grow into ageing with honesty, presence, and intention. It invites a shift from performance to truth, from maintaining an identity to deepening into who we really are. Rather than urging reinvention for its own sake, it asks what feels meaningful now, what feels spacious, and what supports a life of integrity.

Later life is not a single moment of transition. It is an unfolding terrain. ThriveSpan offers a map, not to direct people, but to give language to what they are already sensing.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT LATER LIFE

Across decades of study and lived experience, one truth emerges consistently: what we need in later life does not fundamentally

change. We still long for purpose, connection, joy, and the feeling that our days hold coherence and direction.

But the way we experience those needs shifts.

Purpose becomes less about achievement and more about meaning. It often emerges from the bottom up, through small actions that feel right long before we can articulate why. It is not a five-year plan. It is a felt sense of alignment, a quiet thread running through our days.

Relationships, too, matter more than we imagine. Later life is often described in terms of loneliness, but the truth is more nuanced. What matters is not the size of our network, but the depth of our connections, a few stable, trusting relationships that help us feel real and held.

Our beliefs shape this experience as well. The stories we carry about ageing, hopeful or limiting, influence not only our well-being but the way we meet each day. The way we imagine later life quietly becomes part of how we live it.

And then there is the question of well-being itself. Much of the ageing conversation focuses on staying positive or constantly active, but the most enduring form of well-being is something different. It is about emotional steadiness, grounded meaning, and feeling connected to something larger than ourselves.

These threads – purpose, connection, steadiness, and meaning – are the heart of ThriveSpan. They form the foundations on which a life can truly flourish in later years.

THE LANDSCAPE OF OLDERHOOD

Ageing is often framed as decline, but in reality, it is psychologically rich. It involves a series of subtle inner movements: the loosening of long-held roles, the emergence of new freedoms, a shift in focus from striving to truth, and a more spacious relationship with time.

Yet much of what we call “old age” is not biological. It is cultural, a story we inherited. A story that assumes life narrows

with age, that possibility contracts, that identity becomes fixed. These are learnt assumptions, not natural truths.

Longer lives give us decades beyond midlife, but our cultural imagination has not caught up. We have no shared language for early Olderhood: the years when people remain active, curious, engaged. Nor do we have shared language for Elderhood, a quieter and more distilled way of being, marked by reflection and humility.

Olderhood is the broad terrain where many people first find themselves in their sixties and seventies: active, present, purposeful, connected, exploring, contributing in ways that feel true.

Elderhood is different. It is not defined by age, status, or self-description, and it cannot be claimed or declared. Where it appears, it is usually recognised by others rather than named by the person themselves.

Elderhood arises through lived experience, reflection, loss, attention, and humility. It is quieter and less concerned with identity. It shows itself in the ability to hold complexity without rushing to resolve it, to listen more than speak, and to remain grounded in uncertainty. It is not guaranteed by growing older, nor does everyone enter it. Some may touch it briefly. Others may never do so at all.

ThriveSpan does not promise Elderhood. It simply acknowledges that, for some, a more distilled and spacious way of being may emerge over time, shaped as much by circumstance as by intention.

Both have value. Both deserve language.

Without these distinctions, we group everyone over sixty into one undifferentiated category. We lose nuance. We overlook what people are genuinely experiencing.

ThriveSpan gives language to these stages. It acknowledges the reality of change but removes the drama. It recognises that wisdom is not guaranteed by age, and that identity continues to evolve well into our later decades.

THE LONGEVITY LANDSCAPE

In recent years, ageing has been split into countless “spans”: healthspan, wealthspan, brainspan, joyspan, and many more. Each comes with its own tools, metrics, and expectations. The intention behind these frameworks is good, but the cumulative effect can be overwhelming. People tell me the difficulty today is not a lack of information, but making sense of what they are feeling amid competing advice.

ThriveSpan steps back from the noise. It brings coherence. It helps people see their later life as a single, integrated human experience rather than a series of tasks or competing demands.

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

ThriveSpan does not add another strand to manage. It offers a way to step back, notice what is already here, and see where your life is quietly asking you to grow now. It focuses on what feels true rather than what feels expected.

ThriveSpan is not a guide to staying young. It is a way of becoming more yourself.

ThriveSpan invites a pause, a moment to listen inward, to ask not only “What is next?” but “Who am I now?”.

It treats later life not as what remains, but as a meaningful chapter in its own right, shaped by awareness, agency, and imagination.

Later life is discussed everywhere, yet understood almost nowhere. Much of the public conversation revolves around productivity, health, pensions, and lifestyle choices. Far less is said about the inner landscape, the emotional, psychological, and existential shifts that shape who we are becoming.

ThriveSpan offers a grounded and humane response. It neither romanticises ageing nor diminishes it. It recognises that later life is not a leftover period, nor a decline to be resisted, but a stage rich with possibility, reflection, and meaning.

The years ahead are not fixed. They are an unfolding terrain.

Welcome.

A QUIET THRESHOLD

Before you begin, take a moment.
Not to plan. Not to analyse.
Just to arrive.

Pause. Breathe. Notice.

You do not need to know what you are looking for yet.
You do not need a five-year vision or a dazzling reinvention.
You are allowed to begin exactly as you are.
Later life is not a single shift. It is a new landscape.
And the first step is simply noticing where you are.

What do you feel in this moment?
What is asking to be released?
What part of you longs to be seen, remembered, or
reawakened?

This book is not a map to follow.
It is a space to reflect.
A way of giving language to what you are already sensing.
A quiet companion for exploring who you are now and
who you are becoming.
Let this be your invitation to pause.

To breathe.

To begin again, with intention rather than urgency.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

You might be in your fifties, sixties, seventies, or beyond.

Retired, or still working, but differently.

You might be rethinking what success means, or what freedom now feels like.

This book is for you if you are asking:

- Who am I, now that work no longer defines me?
- What still matters to me, deeply?
- How do I make peace with the career I did not have, or did not finish?
- What kind of life do I want to grow into next?

Some people reach this stage feeling content. Others carry regret, frustration, or a sense of unfinished business. *ThriveSpan* holds space for both.

Later life is changing in ways our culture has barely begun to name. We are living longer, moving through more transitions, and carrying stories that no longer fit old ideas about retirement or decline. Many of us enter our sixties and seventies with questions that feel inward rather than outward: What matters now? What is being released? What is being reshaped within me?

ThriveSpan began as a response to this quiet shift. It is not a programme or a reinvention plan. It is a way of paying attention to the inner landscape of later life, the rhythms, choices, relationships, creativity, and moments of joy that shape who we are becoming.

Although written with later life in mind, its themes speak to anyone in transition, anyone who is searching for meaning or longing to live more fully.

This is not just a concept. It is a practice. A choice.

A FOREST OF POSSIBILITY

Imagine your later life not as a single straight road, but as a forest: alive, layered, and open to wandering. In this forest, there is no fixed direction. Some paths are familiar. Others are overgrown or waiting to be found. Some lead to quiet clearings. Others to unexpected openings.

This is the spirit of ThriveSpan: a forest of possibility. Meaning is discovered not by pushing forward, but by walking with attention. You may walk one path deeply, or meander through many. You may sit in a glade for a while. You may return to a trail you once walked and notice something new.

There is no one way through. And there is no rush.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This is a companion, not a course. There is no single right way to read it.

Think of *ThriveSpan* as a woodland trail rather than a linear roadmap. You can pause, wander, linger, or skip ahead. Use it however you need:

Start with a chapter that meets your current questions.
Sit with a prompt and let it unfold over days, not minutes.
Skip parts that do not speak to you today. They may later.
Return to sections as life shifts, noticing what changes in you.

You do not need to work through the chapters or engage with every reflection or activity. Let this be a space to listen, to begin with what matters now, and to root more deeply in your own rhythm and unfolding.

Wherever you are, that is the perfect place to start.

ORIENTATION

The ThriveSpan Three

WHY THESE THREE PATHS

ThriveSpan evolved slowly over years, shaped as much by lived experience and woodland solitude as by academic study. Research on well-being and purpose in later life reveals that flourishing rests not on wealth, status, or constant achievement, but on three intertwined elements: emotional steadiness, supportive relationships, and a sense of meaning.

Psychologist Gabrielle Pfund's work on purpose in later life shows that meaning often emerges from the bottom up, through small, resonant activities that feel right long before we can articulate why. Purpose is not a destination or a role. It is a thread that grows through engagement, curiosity, and alignment.

These insights form the roots of the three ThriveSpan paths: well-being, connection, and fulfilment.

These paths are not linear steps. They are lenses, ways of seeing ourselves more clearly and of navigating later life with intention rather than drift.

THE THREE PATHS OF THRIVESPAN

ThriveSpan is organised around three interwoven paths. They are not stages to move through, nor areas to master. They reflect the main ways later life asks for our attention: inwardly, relationally, and through lived engagement with the world.

Most people move between these paths over time. You may find one feels more alive or more fragile at different moments. The paths do not compete with one another. They support and shape each other.

Path One: Self and Well-Being

This path tends the inner foundations of later life.

It focuses on how we inhabit our bodies, manage energy, respond to change, and cultivate emotional steadiness. This includes physical health, daily rhythm, autonomy, rest, and the inner practices that help us stay grounded.

Self and Well-being is not about optimisation or control. It is about creating the conditions that allow life to feel inhabitable, humane, and steady from the inside.

Path Two: Connection and Contribution

This path explores how we remain relationally alive.

It attends to friendship, family, intimacy, belonging, and the quieter forms of contribution that come through presence, care, and experience. Contribution here is not measured by productivity or usefulness, but by mutuality and meaning.

Connection and Contribution recognises that later life is shaped not by the number of relationships we maintain, but by the depth, honesty, and reciprocity of the ones that remain.

Path Three: Exploration and Fulfilment

This path follows curiosity and aliveness.

It includes creativity, learning, play, pleasure, and the activities that make life feel spacious rather than busy. Exploration here is not about reinvention or proving relevance. It is about allowing interest, joy, and meaning to emerge naturally.

Exploration and Fulfilment honours the human need to feel engaged with life itself, not as a project, but as a lived experience.

After years of coaching and research, one pattern stood out: those who flourish in later life are not simply active, secure, or healthy. They are engaged, with themselves, with others, and with something that feels meaningful.

The nine dimensions of ThriveSpan reflect this. They are invitations to pause, reflect, and reconnect with what sustains you.

This is not about self-improvement. It is about alignment, about living a life that feels true, grounded, and alive.

You may dwell in joy. You may need space to rest. You may feel ready to explore.

There is no set order. You might return to one path again and again. You might linger somewhere longer than expected.

Start wherever you feel called.

A CORE THRIVESPAN PRINCIPLE: INNER AND OUTER CONDITIONS

Flourishing in later life is never only an inner project. Our thoughts, choices, and reflections matter, but so do the circumstances we find ourselves in: our health, relationships, losses, freedoms, constraints, finances, and the social world we inhabit.

These conditions shape our experience just as much as our mindset does.

ThriveSpan recognises this dual truth. We are influenced by what life brings, and we also shape how we meet those moments. Flourishing grows in the space where inner life and outer reality are both acknowledged and where choices honour the whole of our experience.

JOY AND PLAYFULNESS

Allowing Lightness and Delight

In this chapter, we explore playfulness, delight, and the quiet return of joy, not as a reward or outcome, but as a state of being we can welcome back.

Joy in later life isn't always loud. It might be the warmth of sunlight on your face. The mischief of a well-timed joke. The pleasure of doing something simply because you want to.

We'll move through the shifting face of joy across a lifetime, everyday rituals that invite lightness, awe and wonder, and rediscovery through play. Along the way, you'll be invited to let go of the "shoulds" and follow the sparks that still make you feel alive.

JOY IS NOT A LUXURY

Joy isn't a luxury. It's how we remember who we are.

Joy isn't just a feeling. It's a signal. A way home.

In later life, joy can grow quieter but not smaller. It doesn't always look like celebration or adventure. Sometimes, it's the long exhale after a stressful day. The light on the wall. A laugh that catches you by surprise.

And yet, we rarely talk about it.

We talk about health, purpose, money. But joy often gets left until the work is done or not mentioned at all.

Some researchers have begun to speak of a *joyspan*, the stretch of life shaped by meaning, satisfaction, and emotional richness. It's not simply about feeling good. It's about staying connected to what makes life worth living.

"Joy isn't a luxury," Bernie, seventy, told me. "It's how I remember who I am."

This chapter invites joy back in, not as a reward for doing everything right, but as something essential. Not an add-on, but a thread to follow. A way of being that keeps us feeling alive, connected, and fully human.

THE SHIFTING FACE OF JOY

Joy changes over time. In childhood, it's noisy, spontaneous. Puddles. Laughter. In adulthood, it's often boxed in. Saved for weekends. Measured out in holidays. Labelled as indulgent.

But in later life, there's room again. Sometimes unexpected. Sometimes uncertain.

At forty, it may have been ambition. At sixty, maybe calm. At seventy-five, perhaps a melody, a memory, a magnolia tree.

Many of us were raised to be practical, productive. Joy takes time to trust again. It calls for slowness and attention. A return to the small things that once lit us up.

Joy doesn't shout. It waits to be noticed.

Joy is already there. You only need to let it rise.

Activity: The Joy Audit

If you haven't felt joy lately, it doesn't mean it's gone. It may just be buried under routine, under responsibility, under grief.

A Joy Audit is a simple way to listen again. To ask what lifts you, even for a moment.

Take a few minutes and consider:

- What small things make you smile?
- When did you last feel delighted, without expectation?
- What moments bring lightness into your day?

It's not about being cheerful all the time. It's about paying attention.

EVERYDAY RITUALS AND RHYTHMS OF JOY

Joy thrives on rhythm, not rigid schedules, but familiar moments that bring us back to ourselves. Like birds returning to a favourite branch, or light falling through the same window each morning.

Simple daily rituals can become quiet altars of delight:

- music while making breakfast
- a walk that opens your senses
- a cup of tea in the garden
- a weekly call with someone who makes you laugh
- a "joy jar" for noting small moments that lift you

"It gave shape to my days," Joan, sixty-four, said. After her husband died, she returned to their garden, at first, just to tidy. Then she began planting again. "Colour," she said, "when everything else felt grey."

Rituals don't need to be grand. They need your presence. Joy often arrives not because we seek it, but because we slow down enough to feel it.

NATURE RECONNECTION

Later life often brings a shift from striving to reconnection. Not the push for more, but the pull towards what restores.

Nature often plays a part in this. Its rhythms steady the nervous system and remind us of our own belonging.

Reconnecting with nature is not about escape; it's about remembering who we are when the noise falls away.

LETTING JOY IN, EVEN WHEN LIFE FEELS HEAVY

Sometimes, joy feels out of reach. You might be grieving, caregiving, navigating loss or uncertainty. Joy can seem like a luxury, or worse, a betrayal.

But joy is not escape. It's a form of resilience.

It gives us energy to stay engaged.

Softness to remain open.

Aliveness to keep choosing life.

You're allowed to feel joy, even when things are hard. Especially then.

Joy doesn't erase sorrow. But it can sit beside it. It reminds you that beauty still exists, that laughter can still rise, that something in you is still whole.

"I felt guilty laughing," Cheryl, sixty-eight, told me after losing her sister. "But I realised, laughter didn't take me away from her. It brought me back to myself."

Joy doesn't ask you to be cheerful. It asks you to stay open.

The way we meet difficulty matters. Those who continue to experience joy, even amid loss or change, often carry a quiet belief that life can still expand. Psychologists sometimes

describe this as a growth mindset, not denying the hard parts, but remaining open to what might still unfold.

AWE, WONDER, AND THE EXPANDING SELF

One of the deepest expressions of joy is awe, that moment when something lifts you beyond your thoughts. When your mind quiets and you remember you are part of something vast and beautiful.

Awe doesn't need mountains or miracles. It lives in:

- the sound of birdsong at dawn
- the intricate veins of a single leaf
- a line in a book that stops you, mid-sentence
- a memory that arrives like sunlight

Research suggests that finding moments of awe in everyday life can subtly shift how we see ourselves and our place in the world. Brief experiences of awe have been linked to lower stress, improved mood, and a stronger sense of well-being.

Awe doesn't make us feel small in a diminished way. It makes us feel connected. Right-sized. Rooted in humility and perspective.

"It reminds me I'm still part of something bigger," Mike, seventy-four said.

Awe doesn't require belief. It requires attention.

Gentle Invitation: What made you pause this week? Where did your breath catch, even for a second? How might you invite more of that into your days?

REDISCOVERY AND THE PLAYFULNESS OF JOY

Joy isn't always serious. One of the easiest ways to find it is through play – doing something simply because it feels good. Not for approval. Not for progress. Just for you.

And yet, many adults struggle with play. We're taught it's childish, or wasteful, unless it leads somewhere. But play is not a waste. It's a reset. A return to the part of you that knows how to feel alive without striving.

Play can be light or rich, silly or soulful:

- dancing in your kitchen
- playing games with friends
- making up silly voices with your grandchild
- trying something new and not caring if you're "good" at it

Joy also lives in rediscovery. The quiet flicker of something you once loved. A part of you that still wants to be seen.

MY STORY: BECOMING STEVE

WHAT IMPROV TAUGHT ME ABOUT PLAY

I joined an improv class at sixty-three. I had no idea what I was doing. But I couldn't stop smiling. It woke something up in me.

Starting improv was hard. It took me well outside my comfort zone.

At first, I often chose characters a bit like me: thoughtful, measured, careful. And then one evening, we were doing long-form improv, and the scene was set in a sauna. Someone entered and said, "Right, Steve ... " and I realised I wasn't Denise anymore. I was Steve.

Something shifted.

I sat differently. I spread my legs, like men often do. I dropped into a completely different energy, and suddenly, I wasn't performing. I was playing.

That moment changed something in me.

It showed me I could be more than one thing. That I didn't always have to stay in my usual form. That I could say yes, and ... to life.

Improv has never been about performance for me. It's about permission. It's about stretching. It's about laughter and joy and making things up with others, just because.

And that matters, especially for someone like me, who does a lot of serious writing. There's also the quiet side of me, the one who walks slowly through the woods. But this other part, the playful, unpolished, saying-the-wrong-thing-on-stage part, she matters too.

Gentle Invitation: When was the last time you surprised yourself by trying something playful, bold, or out of character? What part of you might be waiting for permission to emerge? If you said yes, and ... to a part of life you usually sidestep, what might shift?

THREE FLICKERS OF REDISCOVERY

Martin, sixty-seven: A local photography class changed how he saw the world. "I walk differently now. More open. More curious."

Farah, sixty-one: A community talk led her to volunteer at a local preservation society. "I thought I was just going to a lecture. Now I feel like I belong."

Tom, seventy-two: A quiet journaling habit helped him name feelings he had carried for decades. "I didn't know I was holding so much. Writing gave it somewhere to go."

Each began with a flicker and became a thread back to self.

CURIOSITY AS ALIVENESS

Age is not measured only by years. We grow old when curiosity fades.

Curiosity is not about seeking novelty or filling time. It is the quieter willingness to keep asking:

What is here now?
What is changing?
What matters today?

Curiosity can be very small. Noticing how light falls on a wall. Trying a new path across familiar ground. Asking someone one more question, instead of assuming we understand.

When curiosity is present, life retains movement. When it goes flat it can narrow, even if circumstances remain generous.

A simple practice: At the end of the day, ask yourself, "Where was I curious today?"

And if the answer is nowhere, ask gently, "Where could curiosity be reawakened tomorrow?"

This is not a lifestyle choice. It is a way of keeping life open.

JOY AS A GUIDE

What if joy weren't just a fleeting emotion but a kind of guide?

In later life, we often crave clarity about how to spend our time, where to put our energy, and what truly matters. Joy can help us answer those questions, not with logic, but with aliveness.

Joy doesn't only bring pleasure; it also invites psychological richness: experiences that stretch, deepen, and surprise us.

Instead of asking, "What should I do?" try asking, "What brings me joy now, and how can I make space for more of it?"

Let joy shape your rhythm. Let it inform your yes and your no. Let it quietly guide your choices, especially when everything else feels uncertain.

This isn't indulgent. It's sustainable.

Many of the small joys we rediscover in later life, reconnecting with others, learning something new, giving our time, or finding new rhythms, mirror what gerontologist Kerry Burnight describes as the pillars of thriving: grow, adapt, connect, and give.

When we follow joy:

- We feel energised, not depleted.
- We become more generous, not less.
- We grow into our fullest selves, not just our most useful selves.

Joy can be a form of discernment. It can help us know when to pause, when to pursue, and when to protect what truly matters.

Gentle Invitation: What have you said yes to that quietly drains you? What brings contentment or delight, and how might you tend to that more? Where might joy be asking for more space in your days?

CLOSING REFLECTION: YOUR INVITATION TO JOY

Joy isn't childish. It's life-affirming. It reminds us that we are not only here to endure but to enjoy.

It might come in bursts or flickers. It might feel new again after a long time away. But it's still yours.

You are allowed to seek joy. To follow your curiosity. To laugh without reason. To feel a sense of delight, even when life isn't perfect.

In later life, joy becomes less about excitement and more about aliveness. A quiet gladness to still be here. Still open. Still discovering what lifts you.

Let joy be a form of presence. Let it be your gift to yourself and to those around you.

Make a short list and keep it close. And when life feels heavy, return to it.

You don't need permission. You only need to remember: joy is still part of your story.

Gentle Invitation: What brings you lightness? Who makes you laugh or feel at ease? Which activities leave you feeling more like yourself?

Reflection Glade: Joy and Playfulness

This glade explored joy not as achievement, but as aliveness, small delights, sparks of play, moments of awe that remind you you're still here, still open, still capable of wonder. You've considered how joy can be a guide, how playfulness reconnects you to yourself, and how even in difficulty, lightness can return.

The next chapter invites you into the final glade: a space for reflection, flexibility, and the quiet courage to keep moving forward with grace, even when the way is uncertain.

Before You Move On

Pause for a moment before you turn the page. Notice what has shifted as you've moved through this chapter.

Reflection prompts:

- What surprised you?
- What would you like to carry forward?
- Where might you need more time, attention, or rest?

Let this be a breath rather than a boundary. You can always return.

"Denise Taylor's *ThriveSpan* is a thoughtful guide to the deeper possibilities of longer lives. Moving beyond longevity hype, she explores how later life can become a time of reflection, connection and fulfilment. Wise, grounded and gently provocative, this book invites readers to stop striving and start truly thriving in the years ahead." – **Avivah Wittenberg-Cox**, Host of 4-Quarter Lives podcast, writer of Elderberries Substack

We are living longer than any generation before us. Yet many people reach later life sensing that the old scripts no longer quite fit.

Work has changed or ended. Roles are shifting. Expectations that once seemed clear no longer feel quite right. A quiet question begins to surface: what now?

In *ThriveSpan*, psychologist Dr Denise Taylor invites us to rethink the landscape of later life. Drawing on decades of professional practice, research into meaning after full-time work, and lived experience, she charts a more considered path through Olderhood where wellbeing, purpose and reflection meet.

This is not a book about retirement as an ending, but about approaching later life with greater clarity, vitality and compassion.

An invitation to walk gently into what matters now.

"Denise offers her readers a gentle companion to later life. Nothing haranguing, no 'shoulds', just insightful questions that stopped me in my tracks. 'Purpose is not a project' now sits above my computer. Profundity on every page."

Dr Lucy Ryan, author of 'Revolting Women: Why midlife women are walking out, and what to do about it'

Dr Denise Taylor is a Chartered Psychologist and award-winning author whose work explores meaning, identity and purpose in later life. Her doctoral research examined how people find meaning after full-time work, and she writes regularly about ageing and longer lives, including for *The i Paper*. She lives in Gloucestershire, where much of the thinking behind *ThriveSpan* emerged in her woodland.

denisetaylor.co.uk

