Stepping Back Without Losing Yourself

Walking Gently Into What Matters Now



Dr Denise Taylor

Psychologist | Author of Rethinking Retirement, ThriveSpan and Career Coaching for Midlife and Beyond

Stepping Back Without Losing Yourself

Walking Gently Into What Matters Now-
One Year On

Dr Denise Taylor
Psychologist | Author of *ThriveSpan, Rethinking Retirement*, and *Career Coaching for Midlife and Beyond.*

2nd Edition August 2026

© Dr Denise Taylor

www.denisetaylor.co.uk

Contents

A Note from Denise 5
A welcome to this guide and the story behind it.

Preface 6

An invitation to pause and listen differently.

Dedication 6

For those standing at a crossroads.

Introduction: Why This Matters Now 7

Why stepping back can become a beginning, not an end

Part I: The Story Behind the Shift
Looking back at a life shaped by striving

1. A Life of Striving 12
How decades of achievement shaped me, and why it stopped working.

2. Rethinking Work and Offers 14
Moving from outward doing to inward being, and imagining smaller, more human-scale work.

Part II: Trying on Alternative Futures
The messy middle of letting go and experimenting

3. The Overwhelm of Possibility 16
When too many options create pressure instead of freedom.

4. Shedding What No Longer Fits 17
Gradual letting go as a path toward lightness and space.

5. Naming the Downsides Honestly 20
Loss, grief, and the pull to keep striving: the costs of change.

Part III: What Opens Up
Discovering the gains of a slower, truer rhythm

6. A Different Kind of Rhythm 22
Choosing joy, depth, and presence over visibility and pressure.

7. From Busy to Balanced 23
How changing the pace of our days creates room for depth, presence, and a different kind of legacy.

8. The Philosophy Emerging 25
Later life as a chance to re-story who we are with kindness.

***Reflections Along the Way* (Interlude)** 27

Part IV: Walking Gently Into What Matters
Living forward with intention, not obligation

9. Intentions for the Next Chapter 28
Gentle signposts to guide a life lived more truly.

10. Reflection Prompts for You 30
Questions to help you listen inward and imagine your own path.

11. Closing Thoughts: An Unfolding, Not an Ending 31
Why stepping back isn't retreat but redirection.

Afterword
About This Guide 32
How this work grew from my own turning point.

Moving On from Amazing People 33
Closing one chapter to make space for the next.

An Ongoing Invitation 34
A reminder that your story, too, is still unfolding.

Companion book – Summer of Shifts 35
A month by month account of the changes

About the Author 36
Books and background: from careers to conscious later life.

A Note from Denise

A welcome to this guide and the story behind it.



This is a different kind of writing for me. For years, my work has been practical: coaching, research, and books to help people navigate careers and retirement. This guide comes from a more personal place. It grew out of a summer when life asked me to stop, to shed, and to listen inwardly.

What you'll find here isn't a programme or a set of instructions. It's a story of transition - my own - told as honestly as I can, with space for you to pause and reflect on your own journey alongside mine.

A year has passed since I first wrote these words. I could have rewritten the original guide with the benefit of hindsight, but that would lose something important: the uncertainty of being in the middle of change. So, I have left much of what I wrote then as it was, adding reflections from a year further along. Some things unfolded as I imagined. Others didn't. And some of what I thought I wanted turned out not to matter very much at all.

Thank you for choosing to spend time here. I hope these pages offer both companionship and gentle encouragement as you explore what matters most in this next phase of life.

Denise x

Preface

An invitation to pause and listen differently.

This isn't a manual. It's not a programme or a step-by-step plan.

What you'll find here is something quieter: a story of change, told honestly, and the reflections that arose as I began to shift from a life of striving to a life with more space.

I share it because I know how unsettling transitions can be. Even when we've achieved a great deal, there comes a time when the old rhythm no longer fits. We long for something different, but the culture around us still urges us to keep going, keep proving, keep producing.

A year on: *I'm even more convinced that stepping back is not a single decision. It is something we learn by living it: noticing what still fits, what no longer does, and where old habits quietly try to pull us back.*

If you've ever felt that tension, I hope these pages will offer companionship rather than answers. My experience is just one example, but perhaps it will help you pause, reflect, and imagine your own alternative future.



Dedications

- For those standing at a crossroads, wondering what comes next.
- For everyone learning that stepping back can also be a way of stepping in.
- For those who no longer want to prove themselves, but long to live more truly.

Introduction: Why This Matters Now

Why stepping back can become a beginning, not an end

For most of my working life, later life was presented as a single story: you worked until retirement, then filled your days with hobbies, travel, and leisure. It was supposed to be a reward, the long rest after decades of striving. But that story has never really matched the reality, and it certainly doesn't match mine.

Approaching 68, I wanted a time out, a chance to reflect on how I wanted my future to unfold. Several factors converged. After a bad concussion the previous year, I had two smaller knocks to the head. Each took time to recover from, and reminded me that I don't always pay enough attention. A conversation with a friend, ten years younger and planning her retirement, made me realise that financially I could be okay too. The end of a long-term relationship confirmed that any decisions were mine alone.



And then, around my birthday, I realised something I had never stopped to notice: I have already worked for fifty-two years. Most people might work thirty or forty, often with breaks along the way, but I had kept going since a month before I was sixteen. That recognition placed me in a different position to many of my contemporaries. I had already given a lifetime of work, and the thought of simply continuing on at the same pace no longer felt either necessary or right.

I was also aware of the world around me. **Increasingly, later life is framed as a time to keep achieving, to stay bold and energetic, to launch new ventures or extend careers as proof that age is no barrier.** There is value in that message, and it inspires many. But for me it never quite fitted. What I needed was to recognise that the old rhythm no longer worked, and to allow myself to step into a new one.

So, I chose to take the summer off; to pause and to dig deep into where I wanted my life to go.

One year on: *I can see more clearly that I wasn't trying to stop working altogether. I was trying to change my relationship with work. Some things have continued, often because they came towards me rather than because I went looking for them. What has changed most is the assumption that every opportunity deserves a yes.*



The question I asked myself was: could I really keep living at the same pace - striving, producing, comparing myself to others? Did I even want to?

The honest answer was no. But letting go wasn't simple. I'd built a career on being productive and visible. I'd written books, spoken at conferences, guided countless people through their own transitions. I knew the language of purpose and contribution well, but now it was my turn to wrestle with what that really meant when the structures of work and relationship shifted.

At the same time, the world around me seemed to demand more. Retirement coaching was becoming crowded. Social media was full of polished voices telling us how to optimise every season of life, or how to scale up with AI if we wanted to remain relevant. I even caught myself wondering if I should take my website, Amazing People, and turn it into an AI-driven coaching business. The thought was tempting, but it felt hollow**. I realised I didn't want to build an empire. I wanted to choose presence.**

So, I gave myself space. I spent days at a time in my woodland. Quiet hours writing when I wanted to, not simply because a schedule demanded it. Time at the gym, not just to maintain health but to notice how strong my body still is. Evenings where rest was enough. And slowly, through this different rhythm, a new understanding began to take shape.

One year on: *Presence has turned out to require boundaries. Having more space does not automatically mean that space belongs to me. Other people, opportunities and requests can quickly fill it. I am learning that choosing presence also means choosing what — and who — receives my attention*.

The original guide was my attempt to put that journey into words. This new edition also looks at what happened after I wrote it. It's not a programme or a prescription. It's a personal story of wrestling with fears of irrelevance, shedding what no longer fits, and discovering that stepping back doesn't mean losing yourself.

It's also an invitation; for you to pause, to ask your own questions, and to imagine what a future shaped by what matters most might look like in your own life. I know not everyone has the freedom I do. My story is one path, shared in the hope that whatever your circumstances, it may spark reflection on what matters most for you.

To understand what needed to change, I first had to look back at the story that had carried me this far.

Rethinking the Later-Life Conversation

In recent years, there has been a wave of writing about ageing that celebrates boldness, energy, and continued achievement. These voices emphasise that later life can be about fresh ventures, new careers, and living with as much drive as in earlier years.

There is value in this perspective. It challenges outdated stereotypes of decline and inspires many to keep exploring what's possible.



Yet my own path takes a different direction. **I am less interested in urging people to extend their careers or reinvent themselves in ways that echo younger models of success. For me, thriving in later life is not about being busier or louder, but about becoming more attentive.**

It may be found in writing in the quiet of early morning, walking in woodland, tending to health, or giving time through volunteering or community. It might mean deeper conversations, or finding joy in simplicity.

This is what I mean by *ThriveSpan,* my way of describing a more considered path through later life, where wellbeing, purpose, and reflection meet. It is not a demand to prove our relevance, but an invitation to walk gently into what matters now.

Our choices in later life rarely appear out of nowhere. The values we carried in youth often leave their imprint, whether through creativity, activism, or the quieter work of building community. These long arcs shape how we age, reminding us that later life is never a blank slate, but a continuation of what has mattered all along.

For me, part of stepping back also means wondering how to remain useful without holding on too tightly, how to create space for those who come after while still offering what I can. Sometimes that looks like sharing what I've learned, or simply making time to listen. At this stage of life, presence can matter more than performance.

One year on: *I notice that I am less preoccupied with being useful. Usefulness can become another way of measuring worth. I still contribute, share, write, volunteer and sometimes work, but I am increasingly comfortable with the idea that I do not have to be useful to everyone who asks something of me.*

With that context in mind, I turned back to my own story, to the decades of striving that had carried me this far, and to why they no longer fit.

I also find myself wanting to claim my age openly. At 69, I don't see any value in hiding it. Too often ageing is presented as something to disguise, as if relevance depends on being "ageless." But I want people to see that life doesn't stop in our late sixties or seventies.

My curiosity, my love of music, my delight in trying new things, they haven't faded. Younger people sometimes tell me it's inspiring to see me at gigs or out in the world with energy, and I take that not as condescension but as recognition that older lives can still be vibrant. In that sense, being visible matters, not for ego, but to show that later life is nothing to fear.

Part of that visibility also means having more time to listen to others now, rather than rushing on to the next achievement. But I'm mindful, too, of my own boundaries. I want to give generously, and also protect the time and space that allow me to keep living with energy and joy.

Part I: The Story Behind the Shift

Looking back at a life shaped by striving

Every change begins with a reckoning. For me, that meant looking honestly at the life I had built - decades of striving, achieving, and pushing forward, and asking whether it still fit. This part begins with that story: where I've come from, why the old script stopped working, and the first glimpses of something different.

1. A Life of Striving

How decades of achievement shaped me, and why it stopped working.

For as long as I can remember, striving has been the rhythm of my life.

Growing up in a working-class family, there was no encouragement to study. My ambition to pursue a HND and hotel management training was thwarted, and I started work a month before my sixteenth birthday. I was too young, placed in a department where everyone else was over thirty. We had nothing in common, and I felt out of step from the start.



Most school leavers went into the post room, but I had come top of their entry psychometric tests and so I was given what was seen as “a prize.” But it didn’t suit me. I left before the year was out and cycled through twenty jobs in four years, until I joined the Post Office as a counter clerk.

The Post Office had a policy of supporting staff to further their education, which opened the door to a sponsored degree. I began an Open University degree, and that lit a fire, a fire that changed the whole course of my working life. I became more career focused, proactive in demonstrating what I could do, and each year’s exam success reinforced my resilience and led to another promotion.

I pushed myself to prove that I could achieve, that I could stand alongside those who had an easier start. My education, my career, my books, they all carried the imprint of that determination.

On paper, it looked impressive. Senior roles in my thirties, a successful independent practice for decades, published books, a doctorate earned in my sixties. From the outside, it might have looked like confidence. Inside, it was something closer to compulsion. Each milestone quickly became not a resting place but a platform for the next push.

And always, the comparisons. To colleagues with smoother careers, to peers who seemed to glide through international networks, to the polished voices commanding stages at business schools. I noticed who was paid thousands for keynotes. I told myself I was different, more grounded, less glossy, but the voice of “not enough” kept circling back.



That old script - work harder, prove yourself, strive to be seen - had carried me a long way. But eventually, it stopped working. My body felt the cost, especially after a concussion, which took me many months to recover from. My spirit felt restless, caught between the desire for recognition and the deeper longing for quiet. And somewhere inside, a small voice kept asking: what if there is nothing left to prove?

At first I resisted that question. Striving had become so entangled with identity that letting go of it felt dangerous, as if I might vanish altogether. But the truth was harder to ignore: the life built on striving no longer fitted who I was becoming. It had carried me this far, but it could not carry me into what comes next.

One year on: *I didn't stop working, but I stopped the relentless pace. My time is spent both in my woodland and research and writing. Importantly these are at a pace to suit me, and I no longer feel drained through intensive client work. I follow ideas that interest me, but the urgency has changed. I am less driven by the need to prove that I am still relevant, still capable, still achieving. The old reflex hasn't disappeared completely, but I recognise it more quickly now. And increasingly, I can let an opportunity pass without feeling that I have somehow failed.*

2. Rethinking Work and Offers

Moving from outward doing to inward being, and imagining smaller, more human-scale work.

When the old script of striving began to unravel, the question became not just who am I now? but also how do I want to work, if at all?

For so long, my offers had been expansive: books, courses, one-to-one coaching, media commentary. My life was organised around producing and delivering. But stepping back after the concussion and the breakup, I realised I didn't want to keep building at that scale. What I longed for was something smaller, slower, and more human.

That meant less "outward and doing," and more "inward and being."

I began to imagine a way of working that felt lighter and more aligned. Short, focused conversations of thirty minutes where someone could find clarity without the weight of a long programme. Half-day or full-day sessions in the woodland, where reflection and nature could hold more than words alone. Perhaps even helping people revisit their own life stories, encouraging kindness in the re-telling, noticing how the meaning of events shifts when seen through the lens of age and hindsight.



These weren't grand designs for scaling or building an empire. They were invitations to depth: to sit with someone in a hammock beneath the trees, or to notice how a life story softens when spoken aloud.

The more I leaned into this, the more attractive it became. I didn't need the churn of constant visibility. I didn't need to compete with the next new coaching programme or digital course. What felt truest was slowing down and going deeper; creating spaces where being present mattered more than being productive.

One year on: *Some of these ideas stayed with me; others faded. What became clearer was that I did not want to replace one full working life with a smaller version of the same thing. I still enjoy meaningful conversations, (very) occasional coaching, and work in the woodland, but I have become much more selective about what I say yes to. The question is less "What could I offer?" and more "What do I actually want to give my energy to now?"*

This shift wasn't about withdrawing from the world. It was about choosing to show up differently: not as someone chasing recognition, but as someone offering attention, presence, and care. I have also learned that offering attention does not mean making myself endlessly available.

Writing is the strongest way for me to communicate, as I remain in control of how I spend my time and energy.

My own shift is just one thread in a much larger tapestry. To understand why later life looks as it does for so many of my generation, it helps to look back to where we began.

Part II: Trying on Alternative Futures

The messy middle of letting go and experimenting

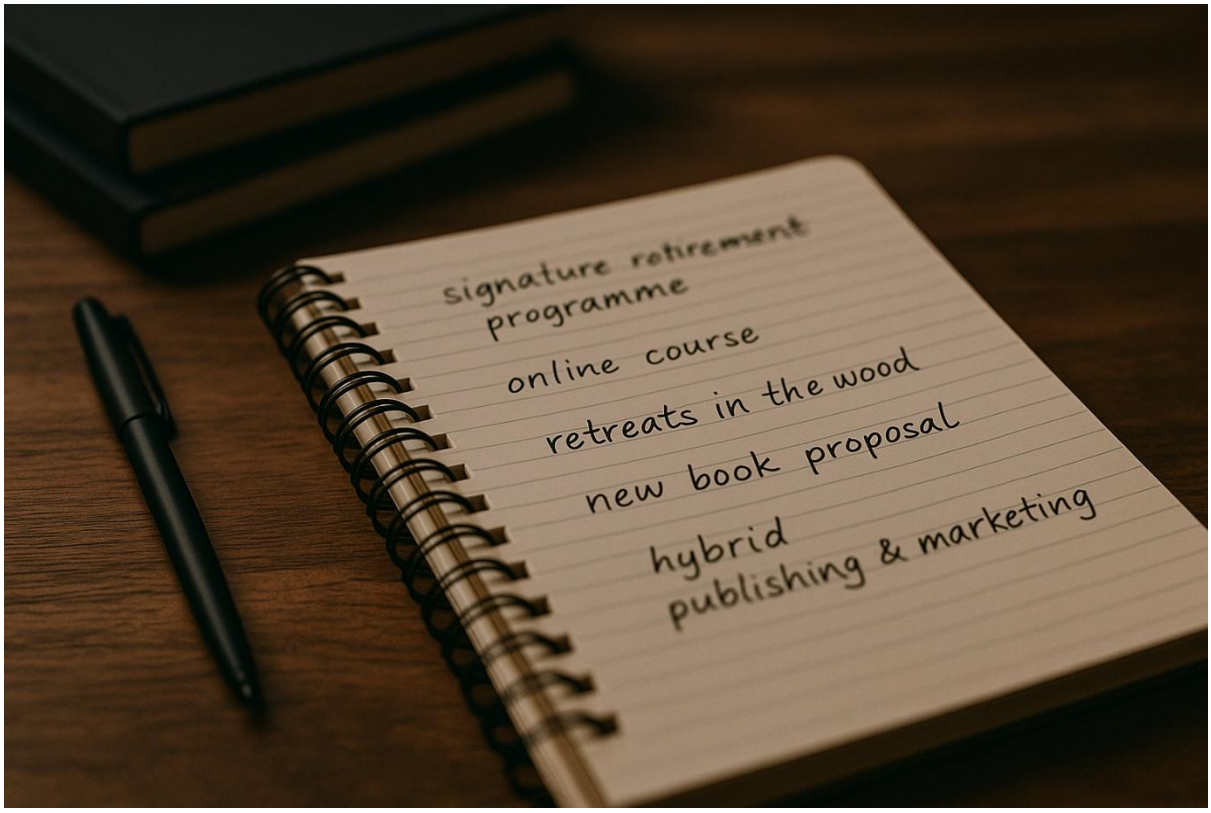
Letting go is rarely a single decision. It is a process of trial and error, of testing possibilities and noticing what no longer belongs. In this part, I explore the overwhelm of too many options, the gradual shedding of identities, and the honest costs of choosing a new path.

3. The Overwhelm of Possibility

When too many options create pressure instead of freedom.

Even as I began to imagine a smaller, more grounded way of working, the old habit of generating options didn't disappear overnight. My notebooks filled with ideas: a signature retirement programme, an online course, more retreats in the wood, a new book proposal, even thoughts about hybrid publishing and marketing support.

It wasn't a lack of ideas that weighed me down, but their abundance. Each one felt meaningful, but together they became overwhelming.



I noticed the familiar tug of comparison, too. Others were still launching programmes, building platforms, creating new ventures in the later-life space. Part of me felt I should keep up. That strong work ethic, the one that had carried me through decades of striving, whispered that rest was indulgence, that opportunity shouldn't be wasted.

But slowly, another truth began to surface. Just because I could do all these things didn't mean I should do them all now.

I began to wonder if the real task wasn't to choose between options, but to set them aside altogether. To let the ground lie fallow for a while. To see what, if anything, grew back of its own accord.

This was not an easy decision. The voice of "you should" was loud. Yet beneath it, I sensed a quieter invitation: what if you simply allowed yourself to be?

For perhaps the first time in my adult life, I chose to experiment with not rushing to act. To stop equating potential with obligation. To let stillness, rather than striving, set the pace.

One year on: *The ideas didn't stop coming. What changed was my relationship with them. I no longer feel that every good idea needs to become a project, a product or a commitment. Some can simply be interesting. Some can wait. Some can disappear altogether. I have become better at letting an idea exist without immediately asking what I should do with it. The fallow ground was not empty after all. It was simply no longer being constantly cultivated.*

4. Shedding What No Longer Fits

Gradual letting go as a path toward lightness and space.

The shift into a different rhythm doesn't happen all at once. More often, it's a gradual process, a kind of vocational moulting, where old roles and identities are released layer by layer.

At the wood, I began reading books, including novels I had never made time for. In one book I came across a description of two kinds of people at this stage of life. There are the ***Reluctant Holders-On***, who cling tightly to what has defined them, anxious to let go even when it no longer fits. And then there are the ***Gradual***

Shedders: those who, sometimes tentatively, sometimes with relief, begin to lay down what they no longer need.



I see many people in that first category. They continue as before, unwilling to let go of their professional identity, and in doing so they avoid the angst I have gone through.

I've come to recognise myself as a *Gradual Shedder.* Since Covid and my doctoral studies, I've stepped away from the heavy demands of full-time coaching, the pressure of constant online presence, the compulsion to always have the next big project ready. It hasn't been a single decision, but a series of small ones: saying no to work that no longer felt aligned, closing programmes that had run their course, letting the edges of my professional identity soften.

Of course, shedding is not without its discomfort. Each layer carries memories of who we were, of effort invested, of recognition gained. But with each release comes something else too: a little more lightness, a little more space.

My work as a wilderness rites of passage guide feeds into this: presence, attention, and ritual as ways to let things go, so that space for the new can open.

One year on: *I still recognise myself as a Gradual Shedder, perhaps even more so. The process has continued in ways both practical and emotional. I have let go of more work, more obligation, more pressure to be visible, and some of the assumptions I carried about what I ought to do for other people. What I notice now is that shedding does not create a permanently empty space. New things arrive. The task is not to fill every space again simply because it has opened.*



Reflection Prompts for You

As you read this, you might want to pause and ask yourself:

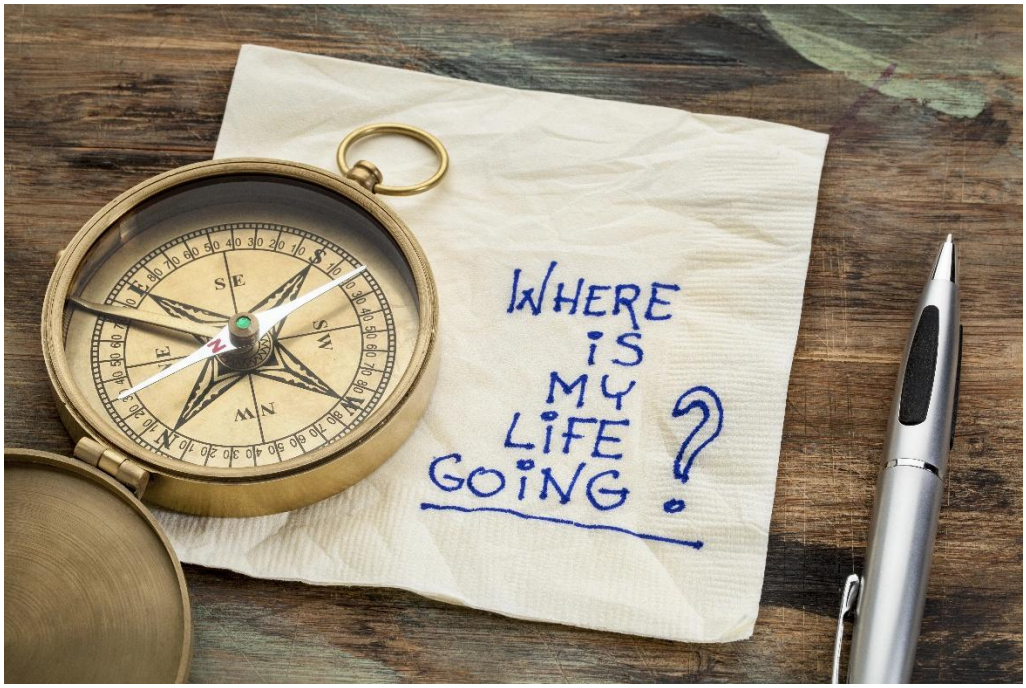
- What roles, habits, or identities am I still holding on to, even if they no longer feel true?
- Where in my life could a gentle shedding bring more ease?
- What's one small thing I could lay down now, to make space for what's next?
- Am I a Reluctant Holder-On, or a Gradual Shedder?
- When I create more space in my life, do I allow it to remain open, or do I immediately fill it with something else?

Shedding doesn't mean abandoning everything. It means recognising what no longer serves, and trusting that by letting go, we create room for something new to emerge, without needing to decide immediately what that new thing should be.

5. Naming the Downsides Honestly

Loss, grief, and the pull to keep striving, the costs of change.

It would be easy to present this transition as all lightness and relief, as if stepping away from striving were only about freedom, joy, and space. But the truth is more complicated. Letting go has its costs, and they need to be named honestly.



One of the hardest losses is identity. For decades, I introduced myself with the shorthand of achievement: psychologist, author, coach, researcher. Those titles were not just roles; they were a way of being seen and valued. Stepping back raised uncomfortable questions: Who am I without this? Will I still matter if I'm not producing?

Alongside the loss of identity came the quiet ache of reduced validation. When you stop striving, your relationship with recognition shifts. Invitations may come less often, or they may still arrive, but they no longer need to carry the same weight.

There was also grief of a more personal kind. Letting go of my relationship brought both relief and sadness. I missed companionship, affection, the practical help in the woodland. But I didn't miss the mismatched energy, the criticism, or the weight of emotional labour. It took time to accept that challenging the pattern, even though it ended things, was necessary for my own growth. That too was part of the shedding.

And then there is the temptation that never fully disappears: the pull to keep producing, to launch one more programme, to compete with the polished voices still filling the online space. It takes vigilance to notice when "opportunity" is just another form of pressure. The old reflex, to prove, to achieve, to stay visible, is strong.



Acknowledging these downsides doesn't mean regretting the choice to step back. It means recognising that transitions are rarely neat. They involve loss as well as gain, grief alongside relief. By naming them, we make space for a more honest freedom, one that doesn't depend on pretending the costs don't exist.

The shedding was not without pain, but it created room. Into that space, new ways of living and working began to emerge, tentative at first, but gradually forming the outline of a life that felt more my own.

One year on: *Some of the losses I feared have mattered less than I expected. I have not disappeared because I stepped back. Work and recognition still come towards me, but I feel less compelled to pursue them. What has been harder, perhaps, is learning that freedom also asks something of me: to tolerate empty space, to disappoint people occasionally, and to resist slipping back into old patterns simply because they are familiar. I thought the challenge would be letting go. Increasingly, I see that the challenge is also learning not to pick everything back up again.*

Part III: What Opens Up

Discovering the gains of a slower, truer rhythm

Once the noise of striving begins to quieten, something else comes into view - space and presence. A rhythm less concerned with output and more with alignment. This part is about the gains that emerge when we step away from proving ourselves and begin to live more fully in what matters now.

6. A Different Kind of Rhythm

Choosing joy, depth, and presence over visibility and pressure.



If striving was the rhythm of my earlier life, what I'm learning now is a very different tempo. It's slower, quieter, but no less alive.

I've begun to choose depth over visibility, and presence over performance. Instead of chasing the next invitation or measuring my worth through output, I write because I have something I want to say, rather than simply to satisfy a schedule. I speak when there's a genuine desire to connect, not because I feel obliged to keep my name in circulation.

This change isn't about withdrawing from life. It's about redirecting my energy toward what feels real. Long days in the woodland, tending to the paths and noticing the small shifts in the seasons. Time in the gym, not for appearance, but for strength and vitality. Time spent in conversation with people who are exploring their own transitions, not because I need to, but because it feels meaningful to be alongside them.

A sentence has become an anchor for me: *I've done enough, now I live in a way that feels real and right for me.*

> ***I've done enough, now I live in a way that feels real and right for me.***

It reminds me that my worth doesn't depend on constant proving. That a lifetime of work and contribution doesn't vanish when I step back. That the quieter life I'm choosing is not a lesser life, but truer to the person I've become.

Stepping away is not the same as stepping out. It's not an ending, but a redirection: from striving to spaciousness, from output to presence, from proving to being. And in that redirection, a new rhythm is taking root.

One year on: *What I understand more clearly now is that a quieter life is not necessarily a less full life. I still write, work occasionally, go to the theatre, spend time with people, travel, volunteer and follow ideas that interest me. The difference is that I am less willing to let activity become the measure of whether a day has been worthwhile. Some days are full. Some are spacious. Both can be good. The rhythm matters more to me now than the amount I accomplish.*

7. From Busy to Balanced: Rethinking Rhythm in Later Life

How changing the pace of our days creates room for depth, presence, and a different kind of legacy.

After learning to live at a slower tempo, I also began to think about rhythm in a broader sense, how we shape our days and weeks, and how pacing itself becomes a foundation for thriving in later life.

For years I could pack a week full of client sessions, speaking engagements, long writing days, and still squeeze in a woodland walk or a gym session. That rhythm, while once manageable, no longer fits. It isn't that I have lost energy. It's that I no longer want to run on empty.

Learning to Pace Differently

We spend decades learning how to work hard. But how many of us ever learn how to rest well?

I've come to believe that rhythm is the hidden foundation of thriving in later life. It isn't only about balancing work and rest, but about the cadence of our attention and commitments. In our younger years, life often sets the pace for us: jobs, children, deadlines. Later on, we are offered something rarer: the freedom to choose. That freedom can feel disorienting unless we learn how to use it well.

The goal is no longer to do more. It is to do what matters, in a way that feels sustainable, spacious, and human.



Curating the Calendar

What would it mean to treat our calendar less as a container to be filled and more as a landscape to be shaped?

I began to imagine markers of light across the year: weeks for rest, days for reconnection, moments with nothing planned beyond reflection. These pauses act as beacons, steady points that keep us oriented when life threatens to pull us back into old habits of busyness.

In my work with others, I often hear people say:

"I'm not sure what I want yet … but I know I can't go on like this."

Perhaps the first step isn't planning the next big thing.
Perhaps it is creating space, and allowing something new to emerge.

One year on: *I have learned that creating space is only half the task. The other half is protecting it. An empty afternoon can quickly become available to everyone else unless I decide that it already belongs to me. I am getting better at treating time with*

myself as a real commitment, rather than as time that can be given away because nothing else is written in the diary.

Legacy Isn't Always Loud

One of the unexpected joys of slowing down has been reconnecting with people from the past, those who remembered a conversation, a workshop, or a single phrase that stayed with them. That kind of legacy feels different now. It isn't about accolades. It is about presence, and about how — and for whom — we choose to show up

Contribution in later life doesn't have to echo the scale of earlier achievements. It might look like mentoring quietly, writing what needs to be written, or sharing hard-won wisdom in a small circle. It can be simple, steady, and no less valuable.

Creating Space to Rebalance

I remain drawn to creating spaces for this kind of reflection: retreats, small-group circles, and conversations that are not about performance but about meaning, rhythm, and reconnection.

In my notes I have written the phrase *"Space to Rebalance."* It captures what many of us are seeking: less pressure, more alignment, and the courage to live at the pace that feels truest now.

So the question becomes:

What would it look like to stop filling your calendar, and start curating it?

---

8. The Philosophy Emerging

Later life as a chance to re-story who we are with kindness.

As I slowed the rhythm of my days and began curating life more intentionally, I noticed that something deeper was also taking shape. Beneath the practical shifts: fewer commitments, more pauses, a calendar that finally felt like mine, there was a change in how I understood later life itself.

It became less about managing time and more about re-storying identity. The quieter rhythm opened space to see my life differently: not only as a series of achievements and obligations, but as an unfolding story that could be told with greater honesty and compassion.

Life after full-time work, or after any major change, isn't about clinging to an old identity. It's about recognising that our stories can shift. The way we tell them at 40

is not the way we tell them at 70. The same events take on new shades when revisited with hindsight and compassion.



I find myself drawn to this work of re-storying. Both in my own life and in the lives of others, there's power in returning to the past and seeing it differently. What once felt like failure may now be understood as resilience. What seemed ordinary can reveal itself as formative. And the parts of our stories shaped by other people's expectations can be reclaimed with kindness and truth.

This has become central to how I think about later life: later life is not a static stage but a living process, an ongoing chance to live more fully in keeping with who we are now. It's not about withdrawal. It's not about decline. It's about inhabiting our lives with more honesty, more gentleness, and more presence than we could manage when the demands were louder.

When I stop clinging to who I was: the striving professional, the constant achiever, I make space for who I am now, and who I am still becoming. That is not an ending. It's a new way of living into the story of my life.

One year on: *I am even less interested now in finding a final answer to the question "Who am I?" What matters more is allowing the answer to keep changing. I can honour the striving woman I was without needing to remain her. I can value the psychologist, writer, coach and researcher without allowing those roles to define the whole of me. Re-storying is not rewriting the past to make it prettier. It is allowing ourselves to understand it differently as we change.*

Reflections Along the Way

As I moved through this transition, certain insights surfaced that didn't fit neatly into one chapter. They came as notes, fragments, and reminders, but together they marked the ground I was walking across. These reflections became a stepping stone to the ending that follows.

Work, Money, and Meaning

I often asked myself: if we take money out of the equation, would I still work? For many people, the focus is on purpose and continuing to find meaning, and they assume that must come through work. But if the financial need was removed, would work still be the choice? Work can give income, status and meaning. But if financial need disappeared, would we still choose it in the same way?

Nature and the Wood

The more time I have spent reflecting, the clearer it has become that my heart is less in continuing with my old business and more in nature. Stewardship of the woodland has become central, both as a place for my own reflection and, occasionally, as a place I share with others.

Illness, Emotion, and Environment

A book I read reminded me of the dangers of over-positive thinking and the harm that can come from suppressing emotion. Being able to cry, to get upset, is not weakness but health. I was struck, too, by the intergenerational nature of pain, it doesn't stop with our parents, it goes further back.

We also forget how deeply the environment shapes us. Changes in place, autonomy, kinship and belonging can affect wellbeing in profound ways. It reminds me that health is never only individual; it is also connected to the worlds we live in.

The Eldering Role

At a festival, one musician sang a message to his 20-year-old self. It stayed with me. Our role is not to have the answer for everyone, or to make ourselves endlessly available. It can be enough to listen, to offer perspective when it is wanted, and to leave others free to live their own lessons.

One year on: *What connects these reflections for me now is choice. Work, nature, contribution, relationships and even the role of eldering feel less like duties and more like things I can choose into — or not. That distinction has become increasingly important.*

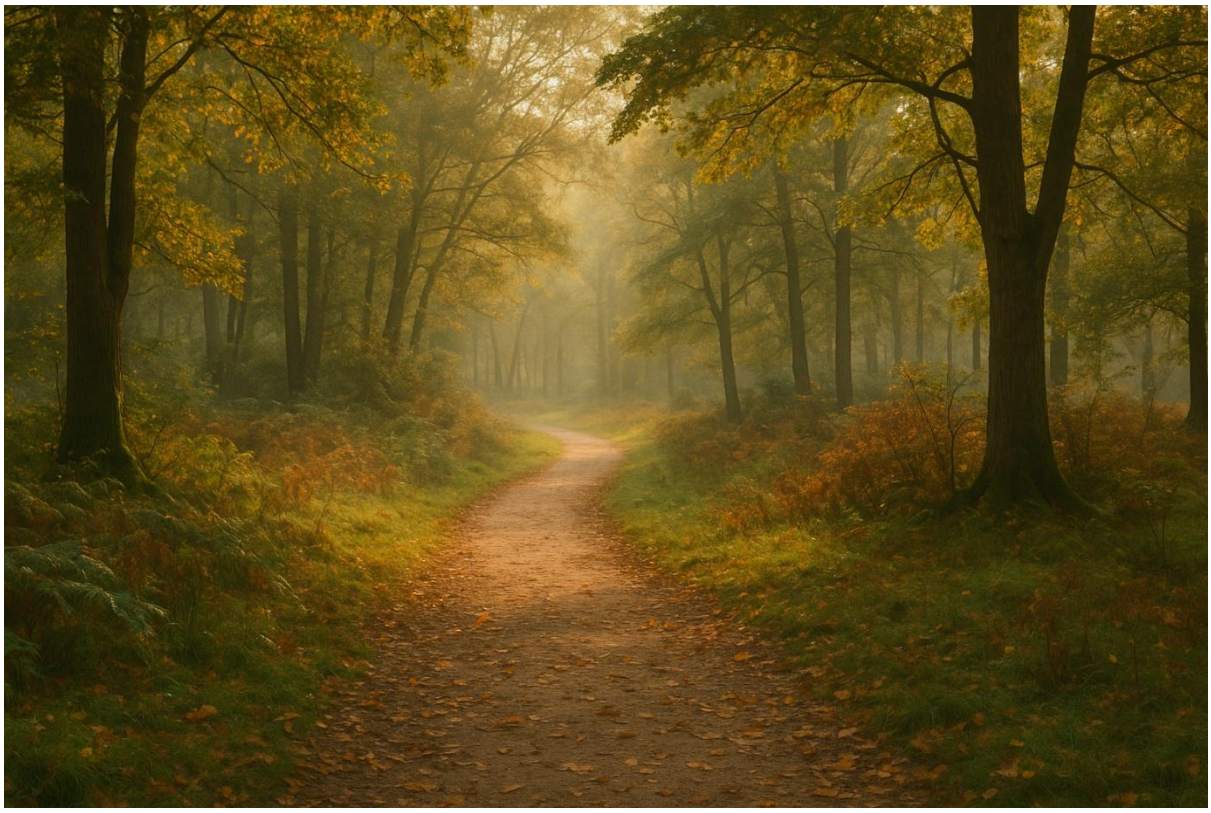
Part IV: Walking Gently Into What Matters

Living forward with intention, not obligation

The future doesn't need to be planned in detail. It can be shaped by intentions, by reflection, and by trust in our own unfolding. In this part, I share the guideposts that help me live more truly, offer prompts for you to explore your own rhythm, and end with a reminder that stepping back is not an ending, but another way of beginning.

9. Intentions for the Next Chapter

Gentle signposts to guide a life lived more truly.



With the old script set down and a new rhythm emerging, I've begun to name some simple intentions to guide me forward. They're not goals or targets. They're more like gentle signposts, reminders of how I want to live in this next chapter.

- **Write when I have something to say.** Not simply to fill a schedule or keep up appearances, but because the words themselves feel alive.
- **Share when connection feels real.** Not from pressure to stay visible, but from a genuine wish to be in conversation.
- **Live from joy and rhythm, not pressure.** To choose the pace that suits me, to honour rest as much as action, to let delight be enough.

This is not about shrinking my life, but about shaping it in a way that fits who I am now. I don't need to prove myself by what I produce. I want to live in a way that feels true, aligned, and sustaining.

These intentions are not fixed. They will shift, as I do. But they give me a centre of gravity. And when the old habits of striving whisper that I should be doing more, I return to them as a compass: a quieter, more faithful guide to what matters now.

One year on: *These intentions have held up better than I expected. I still return to them, although I understand them differently now. Writing when I have something to say has not meant writing less; at times I have written more than ever. Sharing when connection feels real has also meant becoming clearer about when I do not want to engage. And living from joy and rhythm has required me to protect space, not simply create it. A year later, I can see that the words have stayed remarkably similar; what has changed is how firmly I am learning to live by them.*

10. Reflection Prompts for Readers

Questions to help you listen inward and imagine your own path.

This guide is rooted in my own story, but it is also an invitation for you to pause and listen to your own. Transitions are never one-size-fits-all. What matters is finding the rhythm, the story, and the way of being that feels true for you.

You may want to sit with these questions in a journal, in conversation with a trusted friend, or simply in quiet reflection:

- **What needs to lie fallow?**
  Which areas of your life could benefit from rest and renewal rather than constant tending?
- **What's your right rhythm now?**
  Is life asking you to speed up, slow down, or find a steadier balance?
- **Which parts of your story need retelling with kindness?**
  How does hindsight allow you to see yourself more gently than before?
- **Who are you now, and who are you becoming?**
  What identities or roles no longer fit, and what might you allow to remain undefined for a while?
- **Am I a Reluctant Holder-On, or a Gradual Shedder?**
  What might you release to create space for what's next?
- **What do I do with the space I create?**
  Do I allow it to remain open, or do I quickly fill it with new commitments, projects, or other people's needs?

Take your time with these. There are no right answers. The value is in the asking, and in noticing what rises when you give yourself permission to listen.

11. Closing Thoughts: An Unfolding, Not an Ending

Why stepping back isn't retreat but redirection.



When I look back over this journey, what strikes me most is how tempting it was to keep building. At one point, I seriously considered taking my long-standing website and turning it into an AI-driven coaching empire. The messages were everywhere: scale up, optimise, automate, stay visible or risk being left behind.

But that path wasn't mine.

What I chose instead was presence. Days in the woodland, writing when words wanted to come, conversations that mattered more than metrics. A life measured not in reach or recognition, but in rhythm and resonance.

Stepping back hasn't been about disappearing. It has been about living differently. Letting go of what no longer fits, and trusting that enough has already been done. I don't need to prove myself endlessly.

Later life offers us the chance to re-story who we are, to release old identities and live more aligned with what truly matters now. It isn't an ending, but an unfolding — a gentler way of being that leaves space for depth, joy, and discovery.

And so the question becomes: what would it look like for you to walk gently into what matters now?

One year on: *I still believe this. But I understand it more deeply now. Stepping back has not meant becoming less engaged with life. It has meant becoming more selective about what I give my time, energy and attention to. Some things have fallen away. Others have arrived unexpectedly. The work has been not to replace one crowded life with another, but to keep listening for what feels worth saying yes to.*

Afterward: Not an Ending, but a Beginning

About this guide: How this work grew from my own turning point. (updated for this second edition).



This guide grew out of a turning point in my own life: the uneasy, tender, and ultimately freeing process of stepping back from decades of striving. For many years, my work focused on careers, retirement, and later-life transitions. I wrote, coached, and spoke widely about how people could navigate that stage of life with purpose.

As I wrote the first edition a year ago, I began to see that life was asking something different of me. Recovering from a concussion and closing a long

chapter in my personal life, I realised I could no longer ignore my own need for a new rhythm. The guide was my attempt to make sense of that shift while I was still living through it.

Part of that shift was a quiet manifesto: no more reshaping myself to fit roles that drained me. Career coaching had given me much, but it no longer gave me energy. What called instead was the woodland, Vision Quests, and the chance to live from what feels most alive.

This past year has brought a much stronger focus on research and writing. None of it was planned. I was approached by the *i Paper* to write an article, which led to regular commissions. I also completed and published *ThriveSpan*, both as a book and as a model subsequently published in an academic journal. A further book, *Conversations on a Bench*, is now in production for publication in winter 2026/27.

Alongside all of this, I have become much more protective of my time. I want the pauses in between. I want space for life to unfold in a way that suits my natural rhythms. My boundaries are stronger, and I say no more often.

Perhaps that is one of the clearest things I have learned over the past year: **stepping back has not meant doing nothing. It has meant becoming much more deliberate about what I allow back in.**

Moving On from Amazing People

Closing one chapter to make space for the next.

For over twenty years, my Amazing People website was a hub for career coaching resources, articles, and guidance. It grew to house more than 1,000 blog posts and reached thousands of readers.

The site remains online, but its role has changed. I have removed the option for people to book conversations with me, and I no longer see it as the centre of my working life. Instead, it now sits more quietly as a resource hub and archive of work built over many years.

That shift is part of the same journey explored in this guide: not necessarily closing everything down, but allowing some things to take up less space and less energy.

You can now find my current writing and updates at *DeniseTaylor.co.uk* and through my Substack, *Ageing Reimagined*, where I share reflections on later life, woodland diaries, and the work that continues to emerge.

An Ongoing Invitation

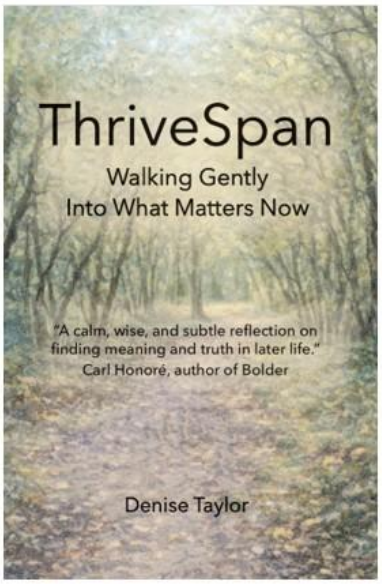
A reminder that your story, too, is still unfolding.

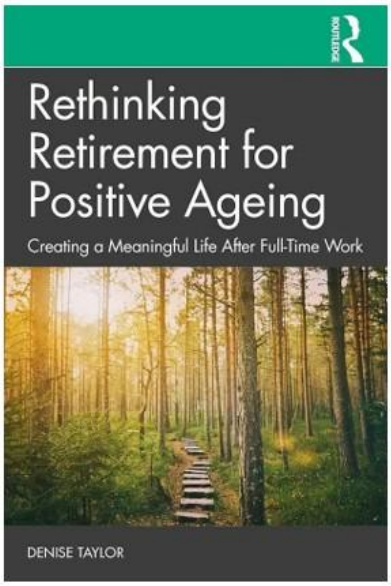
This guide is not a full stop. It's a comma. A pause to take stock before moving on. My hope is that by sharing my process more openly than I have before, others will feel permission to do the same.

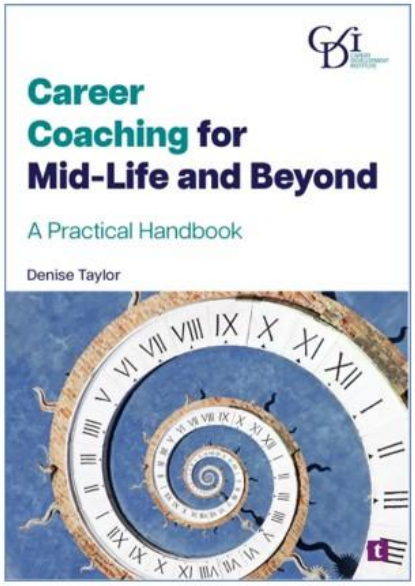
There is no single path through later life. But there is always the possibility of re-storying who we are, and of living more fully aligned with what matters now. For me, that has meant writing a kind of permission slip to myself: to rest without guilt, to go slowly when that feels right, and to shape life around what truly matters now.

A year on, I feel less need to define what my role should be. Sometimes I write. Sometimes I listen. Sometimes I share what experience has taught me. And sometimes I simply get on with living my own life.

I am increasingly comfortable with allowing contribution to arise naturally, rather than turning it into another obligation. There is freedom in not having to know exactly what comes next.

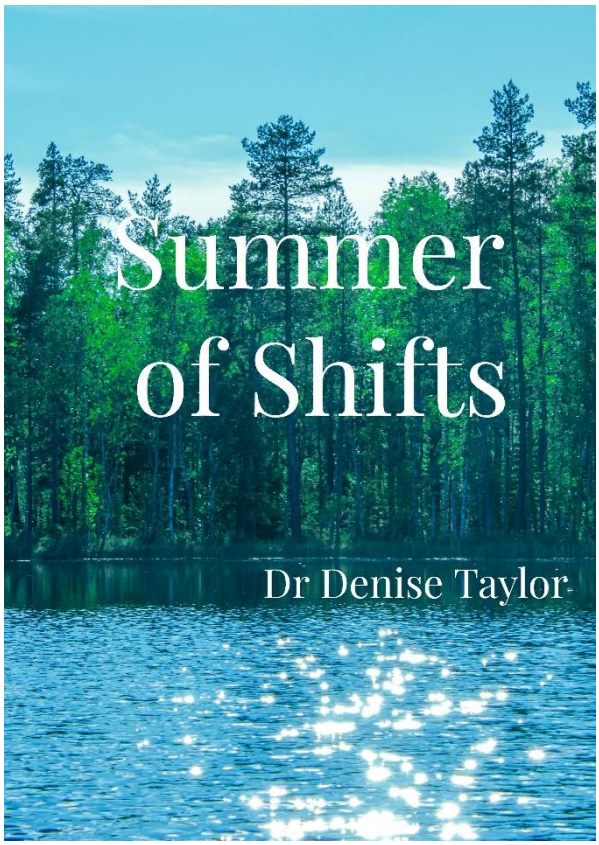






Companion book – Summer of Shifts

A free reflective guide exploring change, transition and the shifts that shape our lives.



The summer of 2025 will always stand apart in my memory. On Saturday 7 June, a long relationship ended. It hadn't come out of nowhere; the weeks leading up to it had carried signs of unease, but when the words were spoken, something final settled in the air.

In the days and weeks that followed, I kept moving: to gigs, to festivals, to my woodland, to my desk. On the surface, life went on. Yet inside, I was navigating grief, confusion, and exhaustion. At times I felt raw and untethered, as if everyone else was walking in sunlight while I stumbled through fog.

And yet, through that same summer, something else began to stir, a gentler rhythm, a different way of listening to myself, the first glimpse of what it might mean to step back without losing who I am.

What follows is not a neat story but a companion to *Stepping Back Without Losing Yourself*. There, I wrote about the concept of stepping back. Here, I share how it unfolded in lived experience, through heartbreak, reflection, festivals, woodland time, and small acts of recalibration.

Download link

About the Author

Psychologist, author and researcher on later life, work and meaning.



Dr Denise Taylor is a Chartered Psychologist and author whose work explores careers, retirement, later life, identity and meaning.

Her books include ***Career Coaching for Midlife and Beyond*** (2025), ***Rethinking Retirement for Positive Ageing*** (2023) and ***ThriveSpan: Walking Gently Into What Matters Now*** (2026).

After decades of work in career psychology and coaching, Denise has increasingly turned her attention to writing, research and the lived experience of later life. Her work draws together psychology, personal reflection, nature, ageing and the question of how we shape a life when the old definitions of work and success no longer fit.

She writes regularly for the ***i Paper*** and publishes ***Ageing Reimagined*** **on Substack**. Her next book, ***Conversations on a Bench***, is due for publication in winter 2026/27.

Visit online

Read more on Substack

Watch on YouTube