

## Adventures in happiness

### The living dead (and I was one of them)

This is a true story of how, aged thirty-seven, after twenty-one years of working for the same corporate giant, I took a chance and changed my life. Of course, changes are inevitable, life is full of changes, but what was so important about this change was me. I had become stagnated, and I had become stuck. And from what I could tell, I wasn't the only one.

Just like the movie the sixth sense I saw dead people. The living dead. That's not meant to be a derogatory comment but I knew I'd become the same as I counted down to the weekend, next holiday, or retirement. I know everyone's circumstances are different, but I became so desperate to escape what was fast becoming an early grave, I did the only thing I could. I stopped digging, quit my job, and set off on an adventure.

At first the change was a struggle. The transition to complete freedom wasn't as expected, and it wasn't until I travelled through Europe and North Africa in a campervan that I adjusted to my new life. I then returned to the UK to find nothing had changed, so I didn't stop there. Instead, I sold my material possessions, backpacked across South Africa, then rode around Sri Lanka on a motorbike. I also kept a theme of kitesurfing mixed with other adventures, such as volunteering with lions in Cape Town, climbing mountains in Africa, and learning to scuba dive with sharks.

But it wasn't all good. Not only did I get into trouble in Tangier, picked up Salmonella whilst travelling in my campervan, and came close to being arrested a few times, I often struggled with an existential crisis. But this turned out to be OK. As I experimented with living in a different way, embracing change, and acting despite fear, I noticed things changing for me. Because, what I had done by stepping away from what was familiar, was give myself a chance to live.

Of course, not everybody has the opportunity to do what I did, so I chose to capture my adventure, and share what happened. If you made it this far then keep going. They say happiness is a journey? Well, they're not kidding, this is mine so far.

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A lion, a donkey's head, and moving on in life

"Ready John?" shouted Cat.

"Ready," I shouted back, failing to sound convincing, and grabbing the ears of the donkey's head, I lifted it off the truck. The head felt warm, its fur thick and bristly, and as I got an idea of its weight in my hands, blood dripped over my trainers. And these were my new and expensive trainers.

The head was also heavier than I expected it to be, but it was too late now, I was committed, and I looked up at the fence I hoped to clear.

On the other side paced Obi. A five-year-old male lion. And in the moment I couldn't help wonder if this head represented my past life. Not that I'd ever decapitated anyone, but what better way to move on from something than by feeding it to a lion!

In the distance I heard a countdown of "three, two, one, go", I swung the head back, and launched it through the air.

At first, for a donkey's head, it flew well. But as it clipped the top of the enclosure I wasn't sure it would make it, or fall back at my feet. But it cleared, the lion pounced, gripped the skull between his jaws, and dragged it off into the long grass.

"Did you get that?" I turned and asked the Norwegian film crew stood beside me.

"We got it" they replied, and gave me a thumbs up and a smile.

I gave them a big grin. Because today was Monday, and I was volunteering at a Big Cat sanctuary in the Western Cape, South Africa. And as my mind drifted back to the office job I left nine months ago, I knew my life could not have been any different. Which was what I had wanted, and perhaps needed, from the start.

March 2015

*The only way to create sustainable change is to reset the norm - Andy Cope - happiness researcher, author, motivational speaker*

### Taking the opportunity.

I dropped the envelope into the post box and gave a sigh of relief. My decision was made, and it felt good. The envelope contained acceptance of the voluntary severance offer to leave the organisation I worked for since sixteen years old. The Human Resource team would receive the letter in a few days. I would then receive a leaving date and a goodbye presentation, someone would cut my pass up, and I would walk out the door and not come back. Twenty-one years and no more. Thanks for your service John, and goodbye.

But this decision hadn't been easy. In fact it took months of procrastinating plus a few yoga classes to settle my mind before I committed myself. Not just because I was giving up a decent wage and a final salary pension scheme, but it went against my societal conditioning of being safe, comfortable, and secure. But none of that mattered anymore.

I was ready to try something new, and it wasn't because I no longer enjoyed my work. I hoped to find value in taking a break, getting out of my comfort zone, and having chance to experience life in a new way, and this wasn't going to be possible with a few weeks holiday a year. I realised if I wanted to make the most of my life, I needed to make things happen for myself. Because if I didn't, I would be in exactly the same place next year.

It's worth mentioning that the opportunity to take voluntary redundancy didn't come about on its own. In fact, I worked hard to encourage it through negotiations with managers for a year, and it was my third application to leave before I got the chance. But why was that so important? Because it helped get me moving. Not only for the financial buffer, but it positioned me where I had no more excuses.

Once HR received my letter, they told me I had four weeks left at work. It wasn't long. As I wrapped up my projects as best I could, and said goodbyes to friends, I had little chance to think about next steps. Then the day suddenly arrived, and as I sat waiting for my presentation, I was a mixed bag of thoughts and emotions. I still had nothing planned, and I would leave that day.

The team came in, the laptop turned on, and my leaving presentation began. I smiled as I received a goodbye ode from my manager Julie, along with positive feedback from my other manager Steve. Then it was time to go. But as I walked out the glass-fronted office I sat in for many years, I had a massive smile on my face. And as I discovered a few weeks later, my fist-pumping-heel-clicking-exit was captured on security camera. I was free.

I was conditioned.

As I woke for my new life of freedom, my first thought was *this feels like a holiday*. Because it coincided with the Easter break (and April Fools day), I drove to North Wales to visit friends and family. I hoped a few days away would help me transition into my new life. What was strange to notice was how relaxed I seemed. It was like an extended vacation. But with hindsight, I may have been in denial I'd just quit a good job with no plan of what to do next.

As I drove I let the thoughts of what I wanted to do run through my mind. *I could travel, maybe volunteer, perhaps even retrain*. But nothing seemed to stick. Then I remembered what a friend had said a few days ago.

"You realise you have an open book", he said, "so come on, what's the plan?"

But I didn't know the plan, and part of me suspected it wasn't as simple as one thing. I pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind and concentrated on the journey. And an hour later, arrived at the crescent-shaped bay of Rhosneigr, on the Isle of Anglesey.

Although Anglesey is far from my home in Derby I consider it one of my favourite places in the UK to practice my passion of kitesurfing. (Which is hanging onto a kite whilst riding ocean waves and attempting tricks on the water). As I looked over the sandy beach, and the rugged mountainous backdrop of Snowdonia national park, the weather seemed fine. I got the familiar excitement of being close to the ocean, and I was glad to chase the wind and the waves.

The next ten days passed by fast as the Easter holidays happened. I caught up with friends, climbed Mount Snowdon, and spent time kitesurfing. But as people returned to their daily lives reality hit me. My time in Wales had been a fun distraction, but now I needed to decide what I wanted to do. Which is where I struggled.

After twenty-one years in a corporate organisation I was conditioned. For most of my life I'd turned up, done what was asked, and rushed home to spend my pay-check. Now I had to make active choices which affected the rest of my life, and it was proving as unnerving as it was empowering. So, with the realisation this transition wasn't quite as easy as first hoped, and a head full of ideas but no firm decision, I drove back to Derby to figure out what to do next.

The problem is choice. The solution is easy.

As I sat in my house in the Midlands I succumbed to the fact the honeymoon period had ended. A few days passed since I returned from Wales. What began as a high culminated in a low. To make matters worse, it had begun to rain. As I gazed through the window I zoned out and watched beads of water forming on the glass. They left tiny trails of bubbles as they fell. And for the first moment since I left work, I doubted what I had done.

I then jumped as I felt a pain in my thigh. "Agghh" I shouted and looked down. My cat, Mitsy had jumped, dug her claws into my jeans, and now hung off my leg. As usual, she wanted

feeding. But she had also brought me back to my self inflicted predicament. Of course, I hadn't made the wrong decision. I just found it hard to decide what I was going to do next.

I wondered then if I could have been better prepared. *Perhaps*, I thought to myself. Yet I didn't need to have life all figured out, but I needed to make my choice, and quick, because there was a risk I would end up where I started. Because that's what we sometimes do as humans. Even when we have choice, we follow what we know, stay comfortable, and repeat our patterns.

As I leant back in my chair and unpicked the cat's claws from my jeans, I relaxed. Then I saw the funny side. What a paradox to have gone from no-freedom to overwhelmed by options overnight! I gave it more thought and concluded an adventure would be a great way to shake me up and give fresh perspective. So I decided to go travelling. It was something I'd always talked about doing. Decision made!

I then researched countries I had interest in and looked at South America, Europe, and Asia, but it didn't take long to confuse myself. Analysis paralysis they call it, and I was right back to where I started. So I decided on a new approach. Choose, trust it's the right choice, and change course if needed. It worked. Once I had decided, I could think about making things happen. And I knew what I wanted to do. Travel Europe in a campervan. This had been a lifelong dream, and I bought a campervan a few years ago for this purpose.

Happy with where my thoughts led, I found an old map of Europe and scanned the pages for routes. I paused at Spain, and noticed Tarifa - the kitesurfing capital of Europe. I had just remembered an email I'd received a few days ago from a friend, Ines, from Portugal. The email read she planned to visit the Andalusian town in a few weeks time, and asked if I wanted to join her and her friends. What good timing!

I kept Tarifa in mind as I looked back at the map, and an idea formed. *What about across the Straits of Gibraltar to Morocco*. As much as Spain interested me Morocco would be more of a travel experience. It was north Africa after all. Then I remembered discussing travels with a friend Tom I had made on my recent adventure to Wales. He mentioned he would be in Morocco in six weeks time and talked about meeting.

I gave it a seconds thought and decided that was enough. I would aim for Tarifa, meet Ines, take a ferry across to Morocco, and meet Tom. Perhaps it was in my subconscious all along, but I now had 'the plan'.

A test to see if I was committed.

I was so annoyed. I had taken my campervan for an MOT and it failed despite being given the all-clear a few months ago. My plan had been to leave in a few days, but now I faced an estimated bill of two thousand pounds, plus a delay of four weeks. *The strip down, welding, the risk of fire whilst being fixed*. All things I didn't need to hear before embarking on an extended adventure.

There was a choice to wait and change my plans, but I didn't want to take it. I guessed this to be a test of my commitment to this adventure. Instead, I enlisted the help of my Dad to try the work myself, and over the course of the next two weeks, in-between unsettled April weather,

supported by cups of tea from my mum, we did what we could. Then I found another garage to finish the job.

As the garage completed the work, I booked a one-way ferry ticket to the north of Spain. There was no procrastination. Just a quick search for a ticket online, click buy, and done. Decision made. I would leave in six days. The van wasn't ready, but I had the idea I would work better under pressure. Enough time passed since I left my job, and I needed to get moving.

The focused approach worked. As I walked back out of the garage after the campervans retest I was smiling. My campervan passed its MOT and was now ready to go. I had cut it fine. There were only twenty-four-hours until my ferry departed. But all I had to do was pack my kites, boards, and clothes and I would be on the road. Then I hit another disaster. With no warning the head gasket failed on my engine, and water began to leak out as fast as I could pour it into the tank.

Convinced that I was being told something, I limped to the garage to ask for help. They gave me two options - fix the problem which could cost up to a thousand pounds and take four days; or try a sealant developed for the American space programme costing thirty pounds, taking forty five minutes, if it worked.

In my mind I didn't have a choice. I wasn't waiting any longer. I asked the mechanics to pour in the sealant, they did, and I stood and waited with my fingers crossed. At first nothing happened. Then the leak slowed, became a drip, and after thirty minutes stopped. I couldn't believe it, and thanking the mechanics I drove out the garage to a shout of "don't go far because it's only a temporary fix". But I ignored it. I would leave tomorrow regardless. This adventure was about to begin.