



CHAPTER ONE, FREE

Stop Giving *Your Life* Away!

Enough of letting fear, old patterns and people decide how you spend the only life you have.

Chapter One: You Know Something Has to Change

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Chapter One

You Know Something Has to Change

You know.

That is probably the most annoying part.

You know the relationship doesn't feel right.

You know you're exhausted.

You know you keep saying yes when some part of you is quietly screaming absolutely not.

You know you need to have the conversation.

You know you're avoiding the bank account.

You know the job is taking more from you than it gives back.

You know you want to start something.

Stop something.

Leave something.

Ask for something.

Change something.

You know.

And yet...

Here we are.

Maybe you've read books about it.

Listened to podcasts.

Saved videos.

Taken screenshots.

Highlighted things.

Made notes about the notes.

Maybe you have a folder called something like New Life containing 14 documents you have not opened since February.

No judgement.

Organisation can be very convincing.

Maybe you've talked about the situation with your friends so many times that they could now perform your part of the conversation without rehearsal.

You:

“I just don't understand why he keeps...”

Your friend:

“Yes. I know. Episode 37. I've brought snacks.”

Maybe you've journalled.

Meditated.

Analysed.

Googled.

Asked people what they think.

Then asked different people because you didn't particularly enjoy what the first group thought.

Very human.

Maybe you understand the problem intellectually so well that you could give a TED Talk about it.

And somehow...

you're still doing the thing you know isn't working.

That space is where this book begins.

The space between:

I know. and

I change. I call it the Knowing Gap.

Not because we need another fancy personal-development term.

The world is coping.

But because I want us to have a simple name for something that can cost years of a person's life.

You know.

But knowing hasn't yet become behaviour.

And if you've been living inside that gap for a while, there's a good chance you've started using it as evidence against yourself.

I should know better.

Why am I still doing this?

What's wrong with me?

I want us to begin somewhere else.

“I Should Know Better” Maybe you do know better.

Excellent.

Knowledge is useful.

But knowing what to do and being able to do it consistently while you're afraid, attached, guilty, exhausted, lonely, angry, uncertain or terrified of disappointing someone are not the same skill.

If information were enough, we'd all be emotionally regulated, financially organised, physically healthy human beings who sleep 8 hours, communicate beautifully and never send a message we regret after 11 p.m.

We have the information.

We know vegetables exist.

We know sleep is apparently important.

We know screaming:

“YOU NEVER LISTEN TO ME!”

at someone rarely marks the precise moment they become especially receptive to feedback.

We know spending money we don't have because we've had a difficult week is unlikely to be recommended by Warren Buffett.

And yet.

Human beings continue human-being.

So if you've been telling yourself:

You know better. Why aren't you doing better?

I want to change the question.

Instead of:

What's wrong with me? try:

What makes this behaviour make sense to me in the moment I choose it? Read that again.

Not:

What makes it objectively sensible?

Not:

How do I excuse it?

What makes it make sense in the moment?

Because afterwards, everything can look obvious.

Afterwards, you know what you should have said.

Afterwards, you know you should have left.

Afterwards, you know the email didn't require 47 minutes of emotional preparation.

Afterwards, clarity is extremely talented.

The interesting part is what happened before the decision.

What were you afraid of?

What were you trying to preserve?

What were you trying to avoid feeling?

What did saying yes give you immediately?

What did staying give you?

What did waiting protect you from?

That's where the pattern becomes visible.

And once we can see it, we can stop treating you like a defective appliance.

You Are Not a Broken Toaster I want to establish this very early.

I am not going to spend the next few hundred pages persuading you that you're broken and then generously offer to fix you.

You are not a toaster.

Although, depending on how your week is going, you may occasionally feel roughly as functional as one.

You're a person.

A complicated one.

Congratulations.

So am I.

You have experiences.

Needs.

Fears.

Associations.

Habits.

Emotional reflexes.

Rules you learned somewhere.

Ways of making sense of what happens.

Ways of protecting yourself.

Some of those ways may now be costing you enormously.

That matters.

But there's a difference between saying:

This pattern is hurting me. and:

There is something fundamentally wrong with me. The first creates a problem we can work with.

The second turns the problem into your identity.

And once you believe you are the problem, every setback becomes evidence for the prosecution.

See?

You did it again.

You always do this.

You'll never change.

Case closed.

I would prefer we conduct a slightly more competent investigation.

Maybe It Once Made Perfect Sense A lot of behaviours we judge in adulthood started as solutions.

Maybe you learned to wait.

Maybe you learned to keep the peace.

Maybe you became:

useful easy quiet strong funny independent

indispensable excellent at reading a room

Maybe you learned to know what everybody else wanted before you had any idea what you wanted.

Maybe disagreement felt dangerous.

Maybe asking for help felt risky.

Maybe love felt safest when you earned it.

Maybe you became very good at being low-maintenance.

The kind of person who says:

“Honestly, I'm fine with anything.”

when you are, in fact, not fine with anything.

You just don't want to become a problem.

Maybe you learned that being needed gave you a secure place in somebody's life.

Maybe being chosen mattered so much that you forgot to ask whether you wanted the person choosing you.

Maybe you learned:

If I'm useful, they stay.

If I'm quiet, there is less conflict.

If I give enough, I'll be loved.

If I don't need anything, I can't be disappointed.

If I wait a little longer, perhaps everything will sort itself out without requiring me to make the frightening decision.

These strategies aren't stupid.

That's exactly why they can be difficult to change.

At some point, they worked.

Or at least they seemed safer than the alternative.

The problem is that human beings are very capable of continuing to use yesterday's solution long after today's problem has changed.

You can spend half your life trying to win a game you're no longer playing.

Survival Strategies Have Terrible Retirement Plans They rarely announce:

Thank you for your service. I'm no longer required.

They tend to remain employed.

Long after the original environment is gone.

You leave a controlling family...

and still panic when somebody disapproves of you.

You become financially independent...

and still feel guilty buying something for yourself.

You find a loving partner...

and still scan for signs they might leave.

You become the manager...

and still believe being in control of every detail is the only way to feel safe.

You work for yourself...

and somehow create an internal boss who would violate several labour laws.

No salary.

No benefits.

Apparently available 24 hours a day.

Efficient.

This is one of the reasons changing your circumstances can be necessary without being sufficient.

Sometimes the environment absolutely needs to change.

No amount of meditation turns cruelty into kindness.

No amount of mindset work makes an unsafe situation safe.

No amount of gratitude makes chronic disrespect healthy.

But sometimes you change the external situation...

and discover that the old rulebook came with you.

Free luggage allowance.

The Rulebook We'll talk about this much more later, but I want you to start noticing it now.

All of us carry rules.

Some are conscious.

I don't drink and drive.

Very useful.

Some are much quieter.

Don't upset people.

Don't ask for too much.

You have to work hard to deserve rest.

Good daughters don't say no.

If someone loves you, you don't give up on them.

Conflict means something is wrong.

If I need help, I'm weak.

Money disappears.

People always leave.

I have to be certain before I act.

Who wrote these?

Maybe parents.

Culture.

Religion.

School.

Relationships.

Pain.

Sometimes nobody ever said the sentence directly.

You simply learned it.

That's what makes these rules interesting.

You may be living according to instructions you never consciously agreed to.

And then judging yourself for struggling to break them.

We're going to look at your rulebook.

Not to throw every rule away.

Some are excellent.

Some protect your values.

Some need updating.

And some...

frankly...

were written by people who should never have been given editorial control.

I Had a Very Thick Rulebook For a long time, other people's decisions carried more authority than mine.

What I wanted mattered less.

What I felt mattered less.

What someone else thought was correct could become the end of the conversation.

I became good at adapting.

Very good.

If you grow up learning to watch moods, footsteps, tone of voice, doors closing, facial expressions, silence...

you become observant.

There are benefits to that skill.

You notice people.

You anticipate things.

You can become deeply empathetic.

But there's a cost if your attention is always pointing outward.

You become an expert on everybody else's emotional weather...

and somehow forget to check whether you need an umbrella.

For years, I knew when other people were angry.

What they needed.

What would keep the peace.

What might cause trouble.

Knowing what I wanted?

Much less developed department.

Opening hours varied.

I Knew Something Was Wrong Long Before I Changed It This happened more than once in my life.

I knew I wasn't happy.

I knew certain things I accepted did not feel right.

I knew I wanted freedom before I understood what freedom would require.

Later, I knew some patterns in my adult relationships felt painfully familiar even though the people and circumstances looked completely different from my childhood.

And still...

I waited.

Explained.

Adapted.

Hoped.

Gave more.

Tried again.

Then analysed why I had tried again.

Then occasionally tried again with better vocabulary.

Growth.

I didn't lack intelligence.

I didn't need someone to appear and say:

“Stella, have you considered simply making better choices?”

Thank you, Susan.

Extraordinary work.

What I needed was to understand why choices I disliked afterwards could still feel so compelling beforehand.

That changed everything.

Because once you understand the pattern, self-judgement becomes less useful than curiosity.

And curiosity asks better questions.

Watch the Question Questions direct attention.

Ask:

Why am I such an idiot?

and your mind will begin producing evidence.

Very obedient.

Remember 2017?

Remember that message?

Remember the haircut?

Apparently everything is now relevant.

Ask instead:

What was I trying to get or avoid when I made that choice? Now the search changes.

Or:

Why does nobody respect me?

versus:

Where am I clearly communicating what matters to me, and where am I not?

Different search.

Why do I always fail?

versus:

What specifically didn't work this time?

Different search.

What if everything goes wrong?

versus:

What exactly am I afraid might happen, and what could I do if it did?

Much more useful.

This doesn't mean asking a nicer question to avoid reality.

Sometimes the honest answer will still be uncomfortable.

Good.

We are not trying to become comfortable at all costs.

We are trying to become accurate.

You Can Know 2 Contradictory Things at Once This confused me for years.

You can know:

This is hurting me.

and also feel:

I don't want to lose it.

You can know:

I need to say no.

and feel:

I cannot bear their disappointment.

You can know:

I want another job.

and feel:

This salary makes me feel safe.

You can know:

The relationship isn't giving me what I need.

and still love the person.

You can know:

I need to start.

and also be terrified that starting gives you the opportunity to fail.

Human beings are extremely inconvenient this way.

Apparently we were not designed in bullet points.

More than one truth can exist at once.

And sometimes the Knowing Gap exists precisely because both choices cost something.

There may be pain in staying.

There may also be pain in leaving.

There may be discomfort in speaking.

There may be consequences to silence.

You may want freedom and certainty.

Independence and connection.

Growth and safety.

That doesn't make you weak.

It means we need to understand the trade.

Empathy Does Not Mean Permanent Permission This distinction will matter throughout this book.

I want you to understand why you do what you do.

Deeply.

Without humiliating yourself.

Without reducing your entire personality to a diagnosis you found on social media at 1:13 a.m.

But understanding why something makes sense does not mean we let it run your life forever.

You may have excellent reasons for people pleasing.

And we still need to look at what it's costing you.

You may understand exactly why confrontation terrifies you.

And at some point, you may still need to speak.

You may have very real reasons for staying.

And we may still need to ask whether those reasons are worth another 5 years.

This book is going to do both.

I understand. And:

Now what? I think you deserve both.

Compassion without challenge can leave you comfortable inside the same pattern.

Challenge without compassion can make you feel ashamed of having the pattern at all.

Neither is enough.

Change Rarely Begins With a Heroic Moment We love the dramatic version of change.

The resignation.

The suitcase.

The declaration.

The door closing.

The big no.

The new city.

Very cinematic.

But usually the real beginning happens earlier.

Quietly.

Something you've tolerated many times happens again...

and suddenly it feels different.

The person may not have changed.

The situation may not have changed.

But your relationship to it has.

A sentence appears:

I don't want to keep living like this. That sentence matters.

Maybe you don't act immediately.

Sometimes you shouldn't.

Maybe you need:

money information support legal advice safety planning skills time

A responsible decision is not always an immediate one.

But something has moved.

What once felt inevitable now looks like a choice.

What once felt normal now looks strange.

And after that, it becomes harder to completely unsee.

The Night Something Became Visible

There was a night in November 2012 when something that had been normal my entire life suddenly wasn't.

It was around one in the morning.

I was 27.

I was in my bedroom with the door locked.

The computer was on.

I was secretly playing World of Warcraft.

Yes.

This is where the rebellion begins.

Not on a motorcycle.

Not at a political demonstration.

A 27-year-old woman hiding a fantasy videogame.

Very Che Guevara.

I would keep something ready on the screen so that if I heard someone coming, I could quickly close the game.

Alt-F4 had become part of my personal security infrastructure.

Then came the instruction.

Turn off the computer.

Turn off the light.

Go to sleep.

Nothing unusual.

By the standards of my life, completely ordinary.

Normally, my mind would immediately have gone to:

How angry is he?

How do I prevent this escalating?

How quickly can I comply?

But something else happened.

A different question appeared.

Why does he get to decide? I was 27.

I wasn't tired.

I wasn't disturbing anyone.

I wanted the light on.

That sounds so small.

It wasn't.

Because the real question was never about the lamp.

It was:

Who gets the final vote on my life? That night would become violent.

It would change my relationship with my father.

It would begin the chain of events that eventually took me out of that home.

But I want to be very careful about where I place the breakthrough.

It was not the violence that followed.

Violence is not transformation.

It was the moment before it.

The moment I heard myself say:

No.

We'll come back to that night.

Not yet.

Because if I simply tell you how I finally stopped waiting, you'll miss the more important question.

How did waiting become so normal in the first place?

What Are You Calling It? Before we go there, I want you to start watching the language you use for your own pattern.

Because sometimes we protect a behaviour by giving it a flattering name.

Waiting becomes:

I'm being patient.

Avoidance:

I just want to make sure I'm making the right decision.

People pleasing:

I'm a caring person.

Overworking:

I'm ambitious.

Control:

I'm responsible.

Self-abandonment:

Relationships require sacrifice.

Remaining attached to someone's potential:

I believe in people.

Maybe.

All of those statements can be true.

The question is:

What does the behaviour actually produce? A caring person can say no.

An ambitious person can sleep.

A patient person can still have a deadline.

A loving person can still leave.

A responsible person does not have to personally control the rotation of the Earth.

Look beyond the label.

What happens?

Again and again?

That's the pattern.

Your Body May Know Before Your Explanation Does Have you ever agreed to something while something inside you tightened?

Smile:

“Of course!”

Body:

Absolutely not.

Or opened a message and immediately felt your stomach drop.

Or walked into a room and felt yourself change before anybody said anything.

Or said:

“It's fine.”

while your jaw had apparently filed a formal objection.

We will talk much more about this later.

Your body is not a mystical lie detector.

Every sensation is not a prophecy.

But physical cues can be information.

Sometimes you have spent so long explaining away your reaction that the body is the first place you notice:

Something is happening here.

We want to become curious about those signals.

Not ruled by them.

Not dismissive of them.

Curious.

Maybe Your Problem Isn't That You Don't Know Sometimes your problem is that you know and don't like what knowing would require.

That is a harder sentence.

Suppose you admit:

This relationship is not changing.

What might follow?

A decision.

Grief.

Uncertainty.

Practical consequences.

So perhaps it feels safer to continue analysing whether it's really not changing.

Maybe one more conversation.

One more promise.

One more month.

One more YouTube video called:

5 Signs They're Finally Ready to Commit.

Very specific research.

Or suppose you admit:

I hate this work.

Then you may have to deal with:

money training applications rejection starting again

Suddenly confusion has benefits.

As long as you “don't know,” you don't have to act.

This doesn't mean all uncertainty is fake.

Sometimes you genuinely need more information.

But sometimes:

I don't know means:

I don't yet want to face what I know. There is no shame in noticing that.

But notice it.

Knowing Can Become Another Form of Waiting

This one is particularly sneaky in personal development.

You can spend years learning.

Reading.

Journaling.

Therapy.

Coaching.

Courses.

Podcasts.

Meditation.

Breathwork.

Watching highly persuasive people on the internet explain your own personality to you.

Some of this can be enormously useful.

Learning changed my life.

I still learn constantly.

But insight can become sophisticated procrastination.

I just need to understand this one layer first.

Then another.

Then why that layer exists.

Then what attachment style the layer has.

Eventually the pattern has a family tree.

And you are still standing in exactly the same place.

At some point, understanding needs to meet this question:

So what? I understand why I do it.

So what will I practise differently?

I know where the belief came from.

What will I do when it appears again?

I know I fear rejection.

Am I applying?

I know I overgive.

What am I saying no to?

Insight should eventually change something outside the notebook.

Otherwise we have become extremely articulate about being stuck.

My Stories Are Not Your Instructions You're going to hear a lot of my story.

Childhood.

Family.

Money.

Relationships.

Work.

Leaving.

Rebuilding.

Mistakes.

Things I handled well.

Things I handled with all the grace of a shopping trolley with one broken wheel.

I am not telling you any of this because your life needs to resemble mine.

Maybe you grew up in a loving family.

Maybe you have never experienced abuse.

Maybe your relationship is fundamentally healthy.

Maybe you need to stay and communicate rather than leave.

Maybe your problem is that you leave too quickly.

Maybe relationships aren't the issue at all.

Maybe it's:

career money confidence family procrastination fear of visibility people pleasing perfectionism a life that looks perfectly respectable from the outside and somehow doesn't feel like yours

Good.

Your story doesn't need to match mine.

My stories are here for one reason: to help you see yours. Patterns are adaptable.

Same road.

Different car.

We'll come back to that too.

I Am Not Going to Tell You to Blow Up Your Life Important reassurance.

If you realise something isn't working, that doesn't mean Chapter 2 requires a resignation letter, divorce papers and an international relocation.

Please remain calm.

Sometimes change means leaving.

Sometimes staying differently.

Sometimes speaking.

Sometimes listening.

Sometimes asking for help.

Sometimes accepting that the problem is temporary.

Sometimes creating resources before making a larger move.

Sometimes the brave thing is action.

Sometimes the responsible thing is waiting strategically.

We're going to learn the difference.

Because waiting itself isn't always the problem.

Waiting without deciding why you're waiting is. That difference would have saved me years.

The First Win Is Not Changing Your Whole Life Right now, I want something much smaller.

Accuracy.

That's it.

Not transformation.

Not confidence.

Not complete emotional mastery before lunch.

Accuracy.

Can you tell the truth about one thing?

Can you notice one pattern without turning it into an identity?

Can you say:

I keep doing this.

without immediately adding:

because I am hopeless.

Can you ask:

What is this doing for me?

Can you admit:

Part of me doesn't want to change yet.

That's useful information.

We can work with truth.

We cannot work very effectively with the beautifully edited press release you issue about your own life.

Start With One Thing Don't read this chapter and decide:

Right.

I will now repair my relationships, career, finances, body, family dynamics, confidence, sleep, house and personality by next Wednesday.

Ambition appreciated.

No.

Choose one thing.

Something you already know.

Maybe:

I keep going back to someone who cannot give me what I want.

I keep staying silent and becoming resentful.

I keep saying yes and hating myself afterwards.

I keep avoiding my finances.

I keep talking about changing jobs and never applying.

I keep abandoning projects as soon as I might be judged.

I keep waiting for somebody else to make the decision.

One.

We're going to carry it through the book with us.

Think of it as our working example.

Your own case study.

Because I don't want this book to become personal-development entertainment.

Interesting.

Emotional.

Lots of highlighting.

Then back on the shelf next to the other books that changed your life for approximately 48 hours.

I want something to move.

What Do You Already Know? Write this somewhere.

Paper if possible.

Phone if that's what you actually use.

I have no emotional attachment to stationery.

Although personal development has done extraordinary things for the notebook industry.

Write:

I already know that... Finish the sentence.

No explanation yet.

Just truth.

Maybe:

I already know that I'm unhappy in this relationship.

I already know that I need to stop lending them money.

I already know that this job is not sustainable.

I already know that I'm afraid to be seen trying.

I already know that I keep abandoning what I want whenever someone disapproves.

Then:

I've known this for... Days?

Months?

Years?

Please don't round down for emotional convenience.

Then:

One reason I haven't changed it yet is... This is where empathy matters.

Do not write the answer you think you should have.

Write the real one.

Maybe:

I am afraid of being alone.

I need the money.

I don't trust myself.

I still love them.

I don't know where I would go.

I'm afraid I'll regret it.

I'm scared of failure.

Part of me still hopes they will change.

I know what to do, but I don't want to experience what doing it will make me feel.

There.

Now we have something real.

What Are You Protecting? One more.

When you continue the old behaviour, what are you trying to protect?

Certainty?

Connection?

Approval?

Hope?

Money?

Identity?

Peace?

The image other people have of you?

The belief that the time you've already invested wasn't wasted?

Sometimes the pattern makes much more sense once you see what is being protected.

And then we can ask the harder question later:

Is what I'm protecting worth what it's costing me? Not today.

We'll get there.

I told you I was going to be lovingly inconvenient.

If Nothing Changes... Don't jump immediately to catastrophe.

We're not creating panic as a motivational strategy.

Just trajectory.

If the situation continues approximately as it is now...

where are you in one year?

How do you feel?

What has become easier?

What has become harder?

What have you lost more of?

Time?

Energy?

Money?

Trust?

Possibility?

Maybe your answer is:

Actually, this probably resolves itself.

Good.

Maybe staying is reasonable.

Maybe the answer is:

I will be in exactly the same place, only more tired.

Also useful.

We often calculate the cost of changing very carefully.

The cost of not changing gets billed quietly in instalments.

We'll put both bills on the table later.

And Please Don't Punish Yourself for the Answer Maybe you're thinking:

I knew this 3 years ago.

Okay.

Maybe you did.

Would it have been wonderful to act earlier?

Possibly.

Can we arrange that now?

No.

I have checked.

Time's returns department remains extremely unhelpful.

What we can ask is:

What can I see now that I couldn't see then? Maybe you have more evidence.

More resources.

More maturity.

A stronger support system.

A different standard.

Maybe you're simply tired of hearing yourself say:

someday.

Whatever brought you here matters less than what becomes possible from here.

Before You Turn the Page I want you to have 3 sentences.

That's all.

I already know that...

I've known this for...

One honest reason I haven't changed it is... Keep them.

We will come back.

Because right now it would be easy for me to tell you:

Great. Now act.

But that would skip something important.

Something I had to understand about myself before almost anything else made sense.

I hadn't simply failed to change.

I had practised something else for years.

Something that looked harmless.

Sometimes sensible.

Sometimes even virtuous.

I had learned to wait.

For permission.

For safety.

For certainty.

For somebody else to decide.

For circumstances to make the choice easier.

For a moment when changing would somehow stop costing anything.

And I became very, very good at it.

So good, in fact, that for a long time I didn't realise waiting had become one of the ways I was giving my life away.

That's where we need to go next.

Because patience can be wise.

Preparation can be wise.

Strategic waiting can be wise.

But there is another kind of waiting.

The kind that has no real deadline.

No real plan.

No real decision.

Just:

later.

And later can take years.

That is where we need to go next.

The rest of the book, including the seven day plan, is available in paperback and ebook at stellanorsen.com/book.html. If the pattern is clear but the next move is not, the Free Strategy Call is open to you at calendly.com/stellanorsen/free-strategy-session