LIMINAL FLUENCY™ · FIELD GUIDE 01

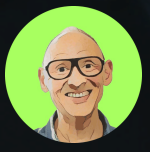
The Transition Map

How career transitions actually work in the middle years, where you are in yours and what to do next.

THREE MOVEMENTS SIX STAGES SIX PROFILES

Christian Ohm

The Liminalist · liminalfluency.com



You are not lost.
You are somewhere specific.

This guide does one thing: it gives you a map of a process most people go through several times in their life without ever being told it has a shape.

This guide does not serve the purpose of a conventional career plan, nor a method for getting to the finish line faster. It is a map, one that provides you with an explanation of the underlying process of the thing happening to you. It is intended to provide comfort in the discomfort and reassurance that what you are experiencing at the moment is completely normal. You will also be able to tell the difference between being stuck and being somewhere that simply takes the time it takes.

Career transitions have been studied for over a century. Anthropologists described the structure in 1909 and psychologists have since filled in the mechanism. Almost none of it reaches the person living through the pain. Instead, most people are told to update the CV and the LinkedIn profile and to network, which works for some, but not for most.

What follows is the part nobody hands you.

THREE WAYS TO READ IT

- **Straight to the stages** (page 13), if you have already taken the Diagnostic (here), know where you are and want the practice.
- **Front to back**, if you want to understand the whole shape before locating yourself in it.
- **Profiles first** (page 32), if you want to start with the pattern that sounds most like you - then come back to the stages, because a profile tells you how you are relating to the transition, not where you are in it.

> *You are not stuck because you lack ideas. You are stuck because the identity you built your career on no longer fits.*
>
> CHRISTIAN OHM

ONE THING BEFORE YOU START

There is no schedule for this kind of work. Wherever you land on this map, you are not behind. What matters is that you are paying attention to it now.

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I built the thing I needed and couldn't find.

For over two decades I worked in corporate, consulting and entrepreneurial roles across Europe and Asia. Then I spent a long stretch not knowing who I was without any of it.

I have held leading positions in large enterprises and know lay-offs, recruitment, headhunters, career coaches and outplacement first hand, from both sides of the table. I took a mid-sized consultancy successfully into a new market and founded my own business: an ambitious sustainable fashion retail venture, three stores and two nominations for the German Sustainability Award. It failed despite my best efforts.

The closure of my venture and the fight for survival that followed threw me somewhere I never expected to end up. The dark side of ambition. The tears nobody sees. The questions that do not let you sleep or ever relax. It felt like a midlife crisis a hundred times over and forced me to look honestly at all of it: my career to date, what I value, how I define success and above all what I wanted next while still providing for my family.

I had been between things before. This stretch was the worst of them. I could not describe to anyone who I was or what I wanted to do, partly because the people asking wanted a version with a plot in it and mostly because I did not have one. I had also crossed fifty and AI looming over everyone's job made none of it simpler.

I did what you are supposed to do. Updated the CV, went to conferences, spoke to career coaches, activated the network. None of it helped and it took me an embarrassingly long time to work out why: the problem was never practical. It sat in my identity, my ego and my sense of self-worth. It also made me realise I had been here before.

It was only after I came across the concept of Liminality that I began to understand where I was and what the phase actually involved. It also showed me two mistakes worth naming. They are the two most common ones and they cost me years.

So I kept looking for what had actually happened to me and because I did not trust my own account of it I went at it the way I would go at a client problem: the anthropology of thresholds, the psychology of transition, a century of research on what happens to identity when the structure holding it up is removed. That work carried me through the painful part, became my self-directed therapy and eventually the framework in this guide.

> *The tools I really needed during the most painful period of my life simply didn't exist.*
>
> CHRISTIAN OHM

A NOTE ON HONESTY

I am not going to promise you clarity by a date, or a job, or anything of the sort. Nothing in this guide shortens the process. What it can do is ease the pain, help you understand where you are and why you are experiencing it and stop you spending the time badly, which is exactly what I did.

MISTAKE ONE

I escaped the in-between by taking roles I should not have taken, simply to get out of it fast. There is no escape that way. It only postpones the thing and you arrive at it later, more miserable and with regret attached.

MISTAKE TWO

I researched, analysed and strategised for more than a year without moving and without feeling any better. Only when I did something concrete did it start to ease.

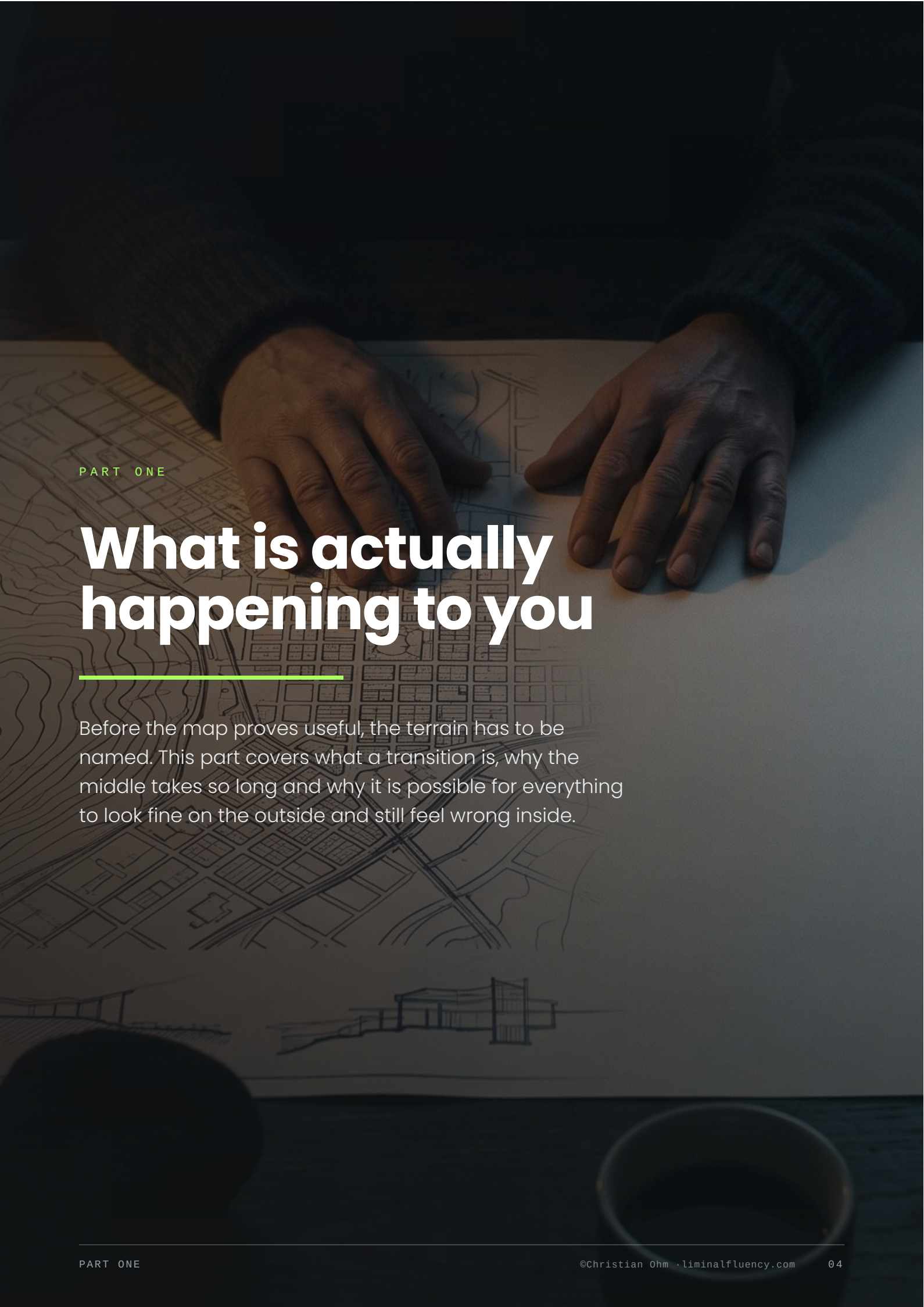


Christian Ohm

Strategic advisor, fractional leader and entrepreneur with 20+ years of international experience. His own transition sent him into the research that became the Liminal Fluency framework. He coaches with it today and writes as The Liminalist on Substack.

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PART ONE

What is actually happening to you

Before the map proves useful, the terrain has to be named. This part covers what a transition is, why the middle takes so long and why it is possible for everything to look fine on the outside and still feel wrong inside.

Three ways in. The same wrong answer.

People arrive at a transition through different doors. Yet almost everyone is then handed the same solution, one aimed at a different problem.

Facing redundancy

The announcement is made and the clock is ticking.

Already out

The job is gone and the identity went with it.

Still employed

Outgrown the role, unhappy, quietly quit already.

ONE SHARED REALITY

Different situations and the same underlying one: **they do not really know what comes next and feel stuck in between.**

And the answer usually offered is the same for all three. A headhunter finds the same job with a different logo, a career coach polishes the CV and proposes marginal improvements to your LinkedIn profile and outplacement promises speed of new placement, but is often an expensive recruitment service that does not really help you move forward.

Each of these is competent at what it does. The limitation sits elsewhere: all three treat a transition as a **placement problem** and all three start from who you were in the past rather than from where you are now. Yet the more important question underneath is:

Who are you **becoming?**

The distinction decides whether the help you buy can possibly work. It is the difference between a technical problem (one your existing skills and strengths can solve) and an adaptive one, where the identity itself is the patient.

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No amount of career planning fixes an
identity question.
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THE TEST

Person A

Needs a new marketing director role. Identity is intact. Knows who they are, what they are good at, where they belong. Uncomfortable, but technical. *They need a recruiter, not this guide.*

Person B

Loses the same job and realises they have been performing a role for twenty years that never really fitted. Cannot answer “what do you do?” any more and does not want to go back. *Identity is in play, the transition has begun.*

Person C

Still has the well-paid job. Outwardly successful. But something has shifted internally. Going through the motions. *The ending has already begun and nothing external has changed yet.*

The A/B/C distinction follows Ronald Heifetz's separation of technical problems from adaptive challenges. Person C is the largest group and the least served.

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Change is situational. Transition is psychological.

The change is the event. The transition is what you have to do internally for the event to mean anything.

The organisational researcher and consultant William Bridges drew this line in the 1980s and it remains one of the most useful sentences in the field. A change happens on a date: the role ends, the contract is signed, the office is cleared. A change often triggers a transition, which has no date. Change is the external event. Transition is the internal reorientation and the process that follows, so the new arrangement can hold.

Which is why a job search and a transition run on different clocks. The search operates on an implementation schedule, the transition on organic timing. Almost all of the distress people describe comes from holding the second thing to the first thing's deadlines and concluding, reasonably enough, that they must be failing, because it takes so long.

And it explains a pattern you have probably watched from the outside: organisations that restructure endlessly and yet change nothing. They manage the change, the schedules and the communication and skip the transition people go through while digesting all of it. Then they wonder why the status quo does not move and conclude that their people are change-resistant. In other words, the furniture keeps moving. The building stays the same.

Every transition starts at the ending

Not at the new beginning. Of everything a century of research has turned up, this is the part people resist hardest and the part most popular approaches invert. Skip the ending and the old identity travels with you: unfinished, repeating its patterns, undermining the new arrangement before it has a chance to hold.

WHAT ACTUALLY ENDS

Bridges separated the ending into five distinct experiences. They do not arrive in order and you can be deep in one while being untouched by another.

01 DISENGAGEMENT

The break from the old way of doing things. Separation from the place, the people, the process.

02 DISMANTLING

The structures go. Titles, rhythms, team, the calendar that organised your week.

03 DISIDENTIFICATION

The hardest one. The self tied to the old reality no longer fits. *"If I'm not that any more, who am I?"*

04 DISENCHANTMENT

The spell breaks. The old world was not as good as memory made it. Painful, but it is what makes moving on possible.

05 DISORIENTATION

Unanchored. The reference points that told you where you stood are simply gone and nothing has replaced them yet.

Note: loss aversion is the mechanism underneath. We hold on to things that no longer fit because they still give us shape. This is not being irrational. It is being human.

> *We don't transform by adding more to who we are. We transform by letting go of who we are not.*
>
> RICHARD ROHR

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Why the middle takes so long

3–5
Major life transitions in a typical adult life

~5
Years the average one takes

~50%
Arrive uninvited, without warning

Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions* (2020), based on several hundred life-story interviews.

Read those numbers again and the arithmetic is surprising: we spend a significant portion of adult life living *inside* a transition, not on either side of one.

Which means the story you have been told - that a transition is an interruption between two stable states - does not just mislead you, it has the shape wrong. The in-between is not the gap between chapters. For a substantial part of your working life it *is* the chapter.

There are four separate reasons the middle cannot and should not be rushed and they come from four unrelated fields, which is what makes them credible.

01 **You cannot write the story before you have lived it.** Narrative emerges from experience; it does not precede it. You are not stuck, you are pre-narrative.

02 **Sense-making is retrospective.** As Karl Weick liked to quote (after Graham Wallas, *The Art of Thought*, 1926): *how can I know what I think until I see what I say?* Structurally, clarity cannot come before action.

03 **Your body only learns by doing.** The gut-level signals that tell you whether something fits are laid down through experience. Imagining a life does not generate them. Living a small version does.

04 **Small moves update the model; big leaps overwhelm it.** Each real experiment produces manageable new information. One enormous jump produces too much at once and you fall back on the old model.

All four point the same way. Clarity comes from doing, not planning - not as a motto, but as the mechanism.

> *One of the difficulties of being in transition in the modern world is that we have lost our appreciation for this gap in the continuity of existence. For us, emptiness represents only the absence of something.*
>
> WILLIAM BRIDGES

THE EXHAUSTION IS PHYSICAL

During a transition your mind is holding two self-models at once: the old one (fading but familiar) and the new one (emerging but uncertain). Running both is metabolically expensive.

Which is why your window of tolerance shrinks. Things that would not normally overwhelm you suddenly do and it takes very little: one rejection, one difficult conversation, one bill arriving on the wrong morning. That is not weakness so much as capacity already spent elsewhere.

If you cannot move, it may not be procrastination

Knowing exactly what you should do and being unable to do it is a recognised physiological state, not a character defect. The tells: numb rather than anxious, watching your own life from slightly outside it, unable to access energy or feeling. Naming it correctly changes what you do about it.

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Everything looks fine. You are exhausted anyway.

There is a specific tiredness that rest does not fix and calling it burnout sends you looking for the wrong cure.

Burnout is an excess problem: more output than resources. The treatment is reduction and restoration: rest, boundaries, recovery. But the exhaustion people describe in transition does not respond to that. You take the holiday, cut the workload, sleep eight hours and come back to the same feeling in the gut, the same inner whisper that something is wrong.

The dual load

The weight of living between who you were and who you are not yet. Your brain is running two operating systems at once. Society expects you to perform coherence while, inside, you are somewhat fragmenting.

It has four layers and most people only ever notice the first.

- **Cognitive** - the old self's reflexes fire before anything newer can interrogate them. You respond from the wrong version of yourself and notice a half-second too late.
- **Emotional** - real grief, not for the job but for the self who lived inside it. The version of you who knew what they were for.
- **Social** - the people around you see a functioning adult. So you carry the load and perform coherence on top of it. Sustained over months, the performance on its own is exhausting.
- **Cultural** - we have no shared ritual for professional endings. No sanctioned way to say "I am between identities and that is fine." And no elders to ask.

TRANSITION DEBT

The unprocessed weight of changes that were *managed* rather than actually moved through. We almost never complete one transition before the next begins, so we carry unfinished business forward. At some point the accumulated weight of all those skipped endings becomes the intense fog when you start to deeply question your whole life.

Don't regret, use it as information.

AND THE QUIETEST VERSION OF ALL

The silent transition. Nothing broke externally. No redundancy, no crisis, no event to point to. But the spell has broken internally and that is why you feel disconnected despite having everything you thought you wanted.

It is the hardest variant because it is socially illegible. There is no story that makes sense in the format other people understand. So you get: *"But you have a good job." "But your life looks fine." "Maybe you just need a holiday."* However well meant, these make it worse. They confirm the fear that what you are feeling is not real, or not valid, or somehow your fault.

It is real. It is valid. And it is one of the most significant things that can happen to a person.



Two versions of the same person, at once.

THE REFRAME THAT DOES THE MOST WORK

Half the power of this experience lies in its invisibility. Once you name it - *"ah, this is the in-between"* - something softens. You stop expecting instant clarity and you stop blaming yourself for not having the next chapter written. Recognising the messy middle is comfort in the discomfort and one of the most crucial steps in your transition.

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Location before direction.

There is a moment when the standard question stops working. Someone asks what you want to do next and you realise you have no honest answer: not a hidden one, not a shy one. None.

That moment is more common than anyone admits and it is not a failure of nerve or preparation. It does mean that most of the help on offer is aimed at a question you are not yet able to answer and vulnerability is what you feel. But that's okay.

What career coaching does and does well

Career and executive coaching is a mature, well-trained, ethically governed profession. It is worth saying so plainly: an ICF-credentialed coach often completes hours of coach-specific education and client coaching before credentialing. It is a craft, mostly seriously practised. Leaders learn to lead better and people in a search get sharper and understand themselves better.

Its shape is clear and it works: **know yourself → know the market → bridge the gap → execute.** Underneath sits GROW - Goal, Reality, Options, Will.

The method GROW opens with a *Goal*. The intake asks what you want. The north-star exercise asks where you will be in five years. Each assume that you actually have an answer to these. And if you do, the method often works. However, if not, if you don't really know what you want to do in future and what you want to become, it is a different story and somewhat more difficult. And, an invented answer steers a good engagement somewhere you did not choose.

There is a second entry condition, less often named: most career methods have no step for what you are losing. Plenty of good coaches do that work anyway, off-script and intuitively based on long-term experience. But it sits outside of the method, so it happens only if your coach goes there and coaching quality varies a lot.

The two sit in sequence, not in competition. Career coaching helps you get from where you are to where you want to be. This work here helps you to firstly find out where you actually are, process what is ending and then build the capacity to move without a destination - so that when you pick one, you are choosing it rather than reaching for it.

TWO PEOPLE, TWO DIFFERENT PROBLEMS

A CAREER PROBLEM

A senior marketer, twenty years in, wants to stay in the industry and move up or across. The CV has not been touched in eight years, the LinkedIn profile is out of date, the network has gone quiet. Uncomfortable, entirely solvable and who they are is not in question.

This is what career coaching is built for and not what this guide is built for.

AN IDENTITY PROBLEM

The same person, same redundancy - except the role never really fitted, they cannot answer "what do you do?" any more and they do not want the next version of the last twenty years. They want something new, something different, yet they do not know what.

That is a different problem class and it is the one this guide is built for.

WHAT THIS ADDS

- **A diagnostic.** Position is measurable: you can find out where you are rather than guess.
- **A stage for what is ending.** Not as therapy and not as a detour, but as the first move, because skipping it is what sends people round the loop twice.
- **A map.** Disorientation frightens largely because it feels formless. A map does not shorten the terrain, it tells you the terrain has edges and that others have stood exactly here.
- **No destination required up front.** You do not have to name the outcome before you are allowed to start.

Two honest notes

Good coaches already use narrative work and life review: the difference is sequence and starting point, not ownership of tools. And this approach has its own failure mode: over-exploration. Commitment Design is the structural answer and is in here for that reason.

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None of this is new. It just never reached you.

The structure of a transition was described in 1909. Everything since has filled in the mechanism. The failure is not one of knowledge, it is one of distribution.

1909 — Arnold van Gennep

Names the three-phase structure of every rite of passage: separation, liminality, reincorporation. The word *liminal* - from *Latin limen*, threshold - enters the language.

1960s — Victor Turner

Shows the liminal phase is not empty waiting but generative. Also names its cost: you are "betwixt and between", socially invisible.

1980 — William Bridges

Separates change from transition and insists every beginning starts with an ending. The Neutral Zone becomes the field's central idea and its most avoided one.

1994 — Ronald Heifetz

Technical problems versus adaptive challenges. His conclusion for our purposes: the common factor generating adaptive failure is resistance to loss.

2001 — Saras Sarasvathy

Effectuation. Experienced entrepreneurs start from means, not goals and commit what they can afford to lose. The logic transfers directly to a career with no visible target.

2003 — Herminia Ibarra

Working Identity. You do not think your way into a new professional self; you act your way in, testing provisional selves. Her warning still stands: reflection can be used as a defence against testing reality.

2007 — Dave Snowden

Cynefin. In complex conditions the move is probe–sense–respond, not analyse–then–act. A transition is complex, not merely complicated.

2009 — Robert Kegan & Lisa Lahey

Immunity to Change. Your inability to move is not a weakness, rather the competent execution of a second, hidden commitment to protect yourself from something you fear.

2014 — Bjørn Thomassen

Permanent liminality, after Szakolczai - what happens when the in-between stops being a passage and becomes the condition. The name for the fear that this might never end.

2020 — Bruce Feiler

Finds transitions are non-linear, frequent and long and that most people have a transition superpower and a transition kryptonite.

Additional sources

Karl Weick on retrospective sense-making · Dan McAdams and Paul Ricoeur on narrative identity · Helen Ebaugh on role exit · Dennis Klass on continuing bonds.

Pauline Boss on ambiguous loss · Chris Argyris on the ladder of inference · Pryor & Bright on the chaos theory of careers.

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Three phases tell you what happens. Six tell you where you are.

WHERE THE SPINE RUNS OUT

Bridges gave us the spine: Ending → Neutral Zone → New Beginning. It is right, it is memorable, but on its own it is not enough to navigate by.

The problem is the middle. Most of the lived experience sits inside one undifferentiated box labelled *Neutral Zone*. If you are going through a transition, the three broad phases can confirm that you are in the middle, but not whether you are at the beginning, three-quarters through or going around for the second time.

So the middle has to be opened up, because lived experience is simply more granular than that. And to open it up you need a criterion for when it ends, which is where I deviate from Bridges' model.

FIRST PRINCIPLE

The Neutral Zone ends not when people *try* a new identity, but when they *identify* with it.

Bridges hints at this. He never quite lands it. It gives a sharper cut than the original three-phase model and it is the line between stage four and stage five.

`Trying ≠ becoming.`

That single distinction is what turns a description into a map. Trying on a new self is still liminal work; identifying with it is a beginning. Most people confuse the two and then either conclude they have arrived when they have only started experimenting, or conclude they are failing when they are exactly where they should be.

HOW THE TWO LAYERS FIT

MOVEMENT	STAGE
Release ENDING	1 Endings & Awareness
Navigate NEUTRAL ZONE	2 Entering the Threshold
	3 Inquiry & Deconstruction
	4 Experimentation & Prototyping
Emerge BRIDGE → NEW BEGINNING	5 Narrative Integration
	6 Emergence & Design Forward

Three movements are the map. Six stages are the lived journey. The movements are what you can hold in your head and draw on a napkin. The stages are what you actually recognise yourself in.

And they do not run in order

You can be experimenting on Tuesday and grieving on Thursday. Healthy adaptation is *oscillation* between facing the loss and rebuilding, not a clean progression through a queue. The stages describe territories you move between, sometimes several times. Cycling back is not regression; it is how the process works.

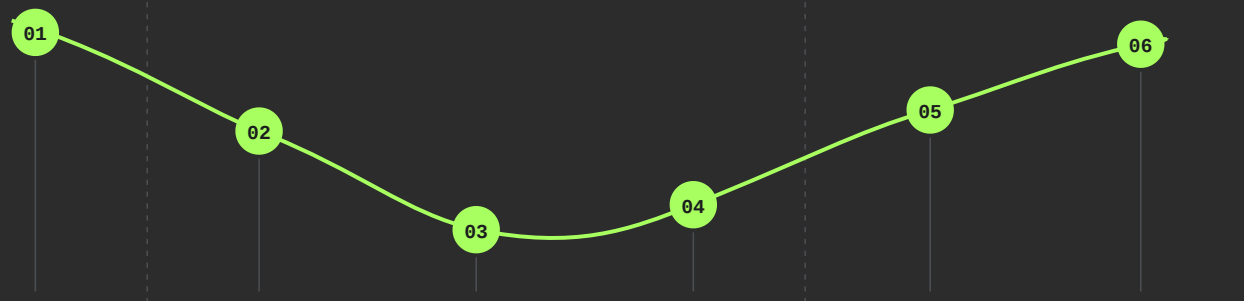
> *A compass that's still recalibrating.*
>
> CHRISTIAN OHM

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Liminal Fluency™

Three movements give you the map. Six stages tell you where you actually are. Six capacities tell you what to build next. **Note the widths. The middle is not a gap between two phases; it is most of the journey.**

01 · RELEASE	02 · NAVIGATE	03 · EMERGE
Letting go	*Operating without a map - the longest stretch of the journey*	*Committing under uncertainty*



SIX CAPACITIES: WHAT EACH MOVEMENT ASKS YOU TO BUILD

RELEASE

Loss Recognition
Naming what is actually ending. Honestly.

Emotional Grounding
Staying regulated when identity is disrupted.

NAVIGATE

Uncertainty Tolerance
Operating without a map, and without forcing one.

Identity Experimentation
Trying on new selves before committing.

EMERGE

Narrative Coherence
Constructing meaning from disruption.

Commitment Design
Moving forward before certainty arrives.

Release feels like

Grief, relief and disorientation at once. The work: naming what is actually ending.

Navigate feels like

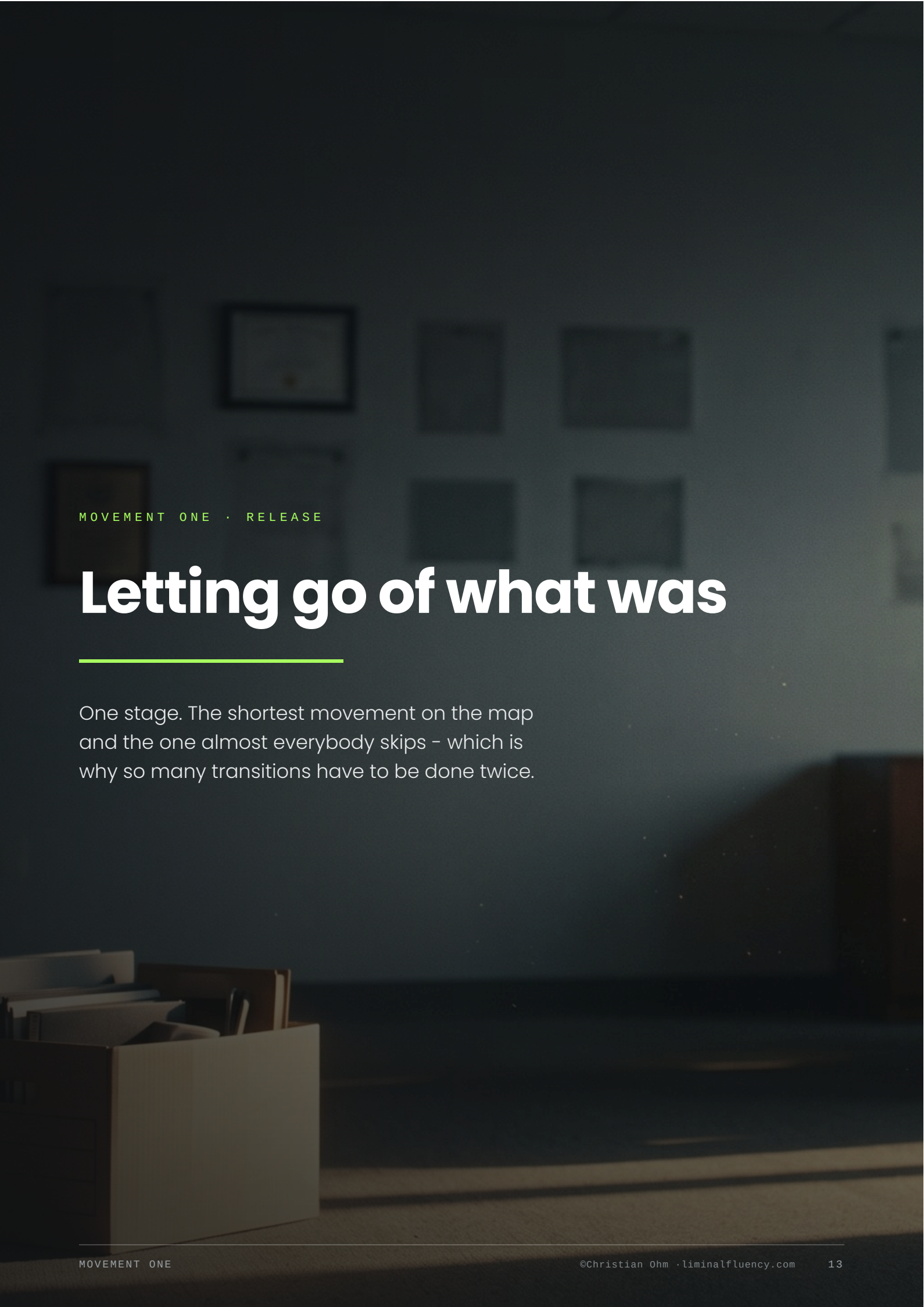
Fog and impatience. *Who am I now?* The work: staying in it without grabbing the first exit.

Emerge feels like

Fragile clarity and the fear it won't hold. The work: committing before certainty arrives.

Whilst it is tempting to read this as a neat, linear process, it more resembles the journey of a rollercoaster. You can be experimenting on Tuesday and grieving on Thursday. People cycle, double back and hold two stages at once, that is simply an honest transition. Also, the stages tell you where the weight currently sits, not how far along you are. And always remember, **wherever you land: you are not behind.**

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MOVEMENT ONE · RELEASE

Letting go of what was

One stage. The shortest movement on the map and the one almost everybody skips - which is why so many transitions have to be done twice.

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01 Endings & Awareness

RELEASE / ENDING / LETTING GO

LOSS RECOGNITION EMOTIONAL GROUNDING

Something has ended. Nothing has begun. This is where every transition actually starts and the stage most people try to skip.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

You know something needs to change. You can feel it in the quiet moments, in the Sunday evening heaviness, in the way certain conversations leave you flat or lost. Something in your professional life no longer fits the person you are becoming.

But letting go often feels impossible. Partly because it is genuinely difficult to identify what there is to let go of. And not because you are weak or afraid, but because what you are holding still has real value and it touches the parts of the self that are hard to admit to: security, identity, status, pride. It is the proof of everything you built and it usually takes centre stage in the story you tell about yourself. Releasing it does not feel like moving forward, it feels like losing something you cannot afford to lose.

So you stay, you function, you perform. You tell yourself you are being sensible, strategic, patient and responsible. And some of that is true. But underneath, the pressure is building. Because part of you already knows and the other part does not want to change a thing about it.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

What makes this stage heavy is that the stated loss is almost never the real one. The role goes and with it what the role silently provided: proof, permission, structure, status, community, protection from uncertainty. For senior professionals the heaviest hidden loss is usually *being the one who knows* - which is exactly what makes the next stage intolerable: they have never not known.

And the grief has nowhere to go. There is no funeral for a career. The loss is real and socially unrecognised at once, so it circulates quietly, unnamed. We celebrate arrivals, but we say almost nothing about what it costs to release an identity that was once needed.

> *Letting go is not abandoning the past but honouring it - while also embracing the present, the near future and even the distant one.*
>
> A LIMINALIST READER

WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

Denial, avoidance, “everything's fine”, clinging to the old identity, refusing to grieve.

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Loss Recognition · Emotional Grounding

YOU ARE HERE





Handing it back is the easy part.

STAGE 01 Every transition starts at the ending. Skip it and the ending travels with you.

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What the work is

The first step is rarely action, it is honesty. Before any plan, any coaching, any decision, you need to recognise and name what is actually ending, clearly and without minimising it. Most people skip this stage entirely and then wonder why nothing moves. What they carry forward instead is transition debt.

It also matters *which kind* of ending this is. Loss, betrayal, failure, liberation and moral reckoning all feel similar, but they need completely different responses. Getting that wrong is the most common misdiagnosis at this stage.

DO THIS

- **Write the version you would never post.** One page, by hand, addressed to the person you were in that role. Not the diplomatic account - the one with the resentment in it and the relief and the parts you would not say at a leaving do. If it sounds like a LinkedIn farewell, you are still performing.
- **Name the deal you thought you had.** Most of us work to an unwritten agreement: do this, get that. Write yours down plainly - *if I worked hard and stayed loyal I would be secure*, or *if I got senior enough it would finally feel like enough*. Then ask whether that deal is still on the table and whether it ever was.
- **Work out what the title was doing for you.** A job gives permissions you stop noticing: people take your call, you speak without justifying yourself, you know what to say when somebody asks what you do. List them. Each one is now something you have to give yourself and that is a task, not a feeling.
- **Find the anchor first.** Family, a routine, a walk, a value, financial stability. Something more fundamental than a job title has to hold before anything else moves.

NOT THIS

- **Do not reframe positively too early.** "What might be good about this?" asked before the loss has been legitimised is the fastest way to lose trust in your own process.
- **Do not wait for closure before you move.** There is rarely a final conversation, an apology or a moment where it is settled. Waiting for one hands the timing of your life to someone who is not thinking about you.
- **Do not delete the old identity in one go.** Do not strip twenty years off your LinkedIn, bin the network or announce you are done with the industry. It feels decisive and costs you the part you will need. You are changing how you carry it, not pretending it did not happen.
- **Do not mistake premature clarity for progress.** "I know what's next" can be real clarity, or sophisticated flight. Grabbing the first available identity to escape an ending reliably produces a worse crisis later.
- **Do not punish yourself for the days you cannot face it.** Some days you will do nothing about any of this and feel guilty by the evening. Alternating between confronting the loss and turning away from it is how people actually get through one. A week off from thinking about it is pacing, not slippage.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

You would not really go back, even if the door opened again. You don't feel bitterness, you can remember the good of it without wanting it returned.

The losses can be named specifically, rather than described as "change".

Energy that was going into holding on becomes available for something else.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *What am I ready to let go - roles, beliefs or identities that no longer serve?*

02 *What went with the role that wasn't the role?*

03 *What loss am I not allowed to call a loss?*

04 *What did it cost me to become the person that role needed?*

Why letting go is this difficult.

Everyone tells you to let go. Nobody tells you why it resists you, or what exactly you are meant to be letting go of.

WHAT MAKES IT RESIST

You are not losing one thing. You are losing three.

Self-Determination Theory names three needs a person has to have met to function well: competence, relatedness, autonomy. A role ending takes all three at once. You lose knowing how to do something well, belonging to a group and the structure and income that made your choices your own. That is why it never feels proportionate to the event. It is not one loss felt too strongly. It is three arriving together.

Deci & Ryan

We overvalue what we already hold

People price what they already own above the equivalent thing they do not. Applied to identity: the old title carries weight partly because it is yours. One caution - the popular version, that loss hurts exactly twice as much as gain, rests on a small early study and has been contested for years. The direction holds, the number doesn't necessarily.

Kahneman & Tversky; contested by Gal & Rucker, 2018

Why it shows up in your body

When the structure that organised your week disappears, the reaction is not only a thought. Sleep goes. Appetite changes. You are wired or flattened, sometimes both in a day. Losing control over what happens next is the most reliable trigger of a measurable stress response there is.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DESTROY IT

The oldest advice on endings says sever the tie. Grief research has spent thirty years moving away from that: what works is a changed relationship with what ended, not an amputation. Helen Ebaugh found the same studying people who left central roles. Nobody fully discards the old one. You become an *ex-*, which is its own identity and one you have to build rather than arrive at.

The task is not to erase your past twenty years. It is to carry them differently.

Inspiration: 解放 · Kaihō. Liberation, release, unbinding. Not only freedom *from* something but freedom *into* something: a loosening that opens, a clearing that enables. It names the moment after you have shed what no longer serves and before anything new has taken shape. Where everything around you asks what is next, Kaihō asks who you are now that you are no longer who you were.

> *A cup that is already full cannot be filled.*
>
> ZEN STORY, AFTER NAN-IN

FINDING WHAT IS ACTUALLY ENDING

Most people name the visible thing and stop. Underneath it is the structure that thing was standing in and underneath that is what it let you believe about yourself. The third layer is the one that matters.

WORKED EXAMPLE, MY OWN

The surface. The business, the stores, being a founder. Real and not wrong.

Underneath it. My corporate career, which had actually ended years earlier, but which I had never let go of.

Underneath that. My definition of success itself - the ladder, the title, the status, the money. That one was the hard one and the only one that changed anything.

FOUR QUESTIONS, IN ORDER

01 *What do you think is ending? Write the obvious answer.*

02 *What was that thing standing inside? A career, an industry, a way of working.*

03 *What did that structure let you believe about yourself?*

04 *Of those three, which one are you actually grieving?*

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MOVEMENT TWO · NAVIGATE

Operating without a map

Three stages and the longest stretch of the journey. This is where the capability is actually built, which is why rushing through it does not shorten anything.



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02 Entering the Threshold

NAVIGATE / EARLY NEUTRAL ZONE

UNCERTAINTY TOLERANCE | EMOTIONAL GROUNDING

The old chapter has closed and nothing new has taken shape yet. This is the fog and it is the stage most people try to shortcut. But this is exactly what makes it last longer.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

It feels literally like being in fog. Not metaphorically, functionally. You look for direction and find questions. You reach for certainty and find more uncertainty. You wait for clarity and it does not come.

The loneliness this creates is particular. You can show up at dinners, have conversations, maintain the surface. But inside you are suspended in something that feels impossible to explain and your head keeps spinning about what comes next without ever landing on an answer. People offer advice, practical, well meant and missing the point entirely. *Have you tried networking? What about retraining? What about your CV?* They are answering practical questions when the real one is existential.

Someone asks the simplest question in the world - *so, what are you up to these days?* - and you feel something close to panic. Not because you have nothing to say. Because nothing you could say would be true in the way it used to be true. You have lost the story about yourself.

And there is a second fear underneath the first, which almost nobody says out loud: the money. Every week in the fog has a price and the price is not abstract - it is a number you check more often than you would admit to anyone.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

The fog is not confusion you could think your way out of. It is what identity dissolution feels like from the inside. Your mind is not failing, it is updating a model of the world that your old role used to make predictable.

The loneliness is structural rather than personal. When you are between stories, you become socially illegible: people do not quite know how to relate to you, so they reach for the nearest script. And there is a cruel physiological twist - the state that makes you most need other people is the same state that makes reaching out hardest. Which is why the advice *"just talk to your network"* so often fails.

> *It's not the uncertainty that scares me. It's that I don't know who I am in it.*
>
> A LIMINALIST READER

WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

Anxiety, paralysis, a desperate search for certainty, inability to tolerate ambiguity, fear about the future, loss of confidence.

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Uncertainty Tolerance · Emotional Grounding

YOU ARE HERE



What it actually feels like

Waking at three. A tightness that arrives before the thought does. Tears at the wrong moment: in a car park, mid-sentence, during something trivial. Irritability with people who have done nothing. Flatness where interest used to be. Envy of the people around you. Regret about past decisions. Constant thinking about a future you cannot picture. Sometimes panic, existential fear, loss of self-worth and confidence and dread of the event where somebody asks what you do.

STAGE 02 The rush to get out of the fog is the thing that keeps you in.

What the work is

Learning to inhabit uncertainty rather than escape it. This is one of the most active things a person can do and one of the most difficult.

It also frames the question differently. Instead of asking *when will this end?*, the focus shifts to the more important one: *how do I move through it?* And what does it take to stay grounded while the ground itself keeps moving?

There is an honest limit worth stating: not everyone can afford an open-ended identity time-out. The real question is what version of this fits the runway you have and how you protect that while still meeting your commitments.

Fears should be named individually rather than as one big cloud. Being too senior, too expensive, no longer relevant. Self-doubt and regret. Being seen as a failure. Having wasted years. Every rejection takes a little more confidence. And underneath them all, the slow fear that this is not a stage but a permanent condition.

DO THIS

- **Name it out loud.** "Ah - this is the in-between." Recognition is the intervention. It is the single cheapest thing that works.
- **Sit with one question for a week** and deliberately do not answer it. The resistance you feel is the material.
- **Ask for witness, not advice.** Decide explicitly who is allowed to ask you about your search and how often. Protect the rest.
- **Give yourself sanctioned time off from it.** Oscillating between facing it and stepping away is how healthy adaptation works.
- **Do the money work explicitly.** Name the runway in months, not in feelings. Decide now what you will do at the halfway mark. A bridge job that buys twelve months is not a failure of nerve, but a good decision.

NOT THIS

- **Do not take the first exit.** Every offer, every plan, every rushed decision is an exit. The task is not to block them, it is to tell choosing from fleeing.
- **Do not accept technical answers to an adaptive problem.** CV advice offered mid-identity-dissolution is a substitution. Name it rather than obliging.
- **Do not confuse busyness with movement.** Ask what the busyness is protecting you from having to feel or face.
- **Do not confuse a financial problem with an identity problem.** If the runway is short, income is the first task and this work runs alongside it, not instead of it.
- **Do not isolate yourself, neither in your head nor physically.** Reach out to people who have been in a similar situation, talk openly about how you feel and you will find you are not alone.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

Ambiguity stops registering as an emergency. You can sit with not knowing without needing to fix it today.

You can observe the anxiety rather than be consumed by it.

Curiosity returns. You stop enduring the fog and start interrogating it.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *What's still steady - family, a routine, a walk, a value? What holds when the roles don't?*

02 *Who around me offers genuine witness and who is just trying to fix me back to normal?*

03 *What is this space trying to show me that the old version of me couldn't see?*

04 *What gives me a good, stable feel and grounds me? Do more of it.*

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Uncertainty tolerance is a trait. Traits can be moved.

Two people lose the same job on the same day. One finds the not-knowing uncomfortable. The other finds it close to unbearable. That difference has a name, a measure and a body of work on how to shift it.

WHAT IT IS

Psychologists call it **Intolerance of Uncertainty**. One of the most studied traits in the anxiety literature, it runs across conditions rather than belonging to any one of them and it is measured with a short validated scale - the IUS-12, twelve statements, three minutes. It is worth knowing your own number before deciding what is wrong with you.

It shows up in two forms and they fail in opposite directions.

Prospective

The need to know in advance. Research, planning, scenarios, one more conversation, one more course. It feels like diligence, which is what makes it hard to catch. This is the version that keeps people in stage three for two years.

Inhibitory

Uncertainty stops you moving. Decisions get postponed, emails go unanswered, the week disappears. Easier to spot, less socially acceptable and usually the one people are ashamed of.

Why the distinction earns its place: the two need opposite treatment. High prospective IU needs *less* input and an earlier commitment. High inhibitory IU needs a much smaller first move. Give either one the other's advice and you make it worse.

> *We have come to expect the future to be minutely predictable. Then it rains anyway.*
>
> AFTER MARGARET HEFFERNAN, UNCHARTED

TWO THAT COST NOTHING

Sort into three piles - what you control, what you influence and noise. Act only on the first two. Most of the exhaustion here comes from treating the third pile as though it were the first.

Postpone the worry. Fifteen minutes a day, same time, worry properly. Outside it, note the thought and defer it. It breaks the all-day loop rather than trying to win the argument.

One honest limit. At the high end this is a clinical matter and it responds well to proper treatment. If the not-knowing has taken your sleep, your appetite and your ability to function for weeks, that is a reason to see someone rather than to try harder at the drills below.

WHAT ACTUALLY MOVES IT

Four practices, from the clinical work on uncertainty and from what good leadership coaches do with the same problem. All of them work the same way: repeated, survivable contact with not knowing.

01 **Graduated not-knowing drills.** Leave one small decision open for twenty-four hours. Order without reading every review. Trivial on purpose - you are training the response, not the decision.

02 **Drop one safety behaviour.** Reassurance-seeking, over-preparing, asking three people the same question. Stop the one you do most for a week. The anxiety spikes, then falls and that fall is the whole mechanism.

03 **Build a certainty floor.** Write down what is still true - your values, your constraints, the money. Then the smallest reversible next step and a date to look at it again. Calm comes from cadence, not from prediction.

04 **Say the three sentences out loud.** What I know. What I do not know. What would change my mind. Said to another person, uncertainty stops being a private dread.

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03 Inquiry & Deconstruction

NAVIGATE / DEEP NEUTRAL ZONE

UNCERTAINTY TOLERANCE | IDENTITY EXPERIMENTATION

Everything you believed about work, worth and ambition becomes available for questioning. The risk is that questioning becomes the activity and nothing is ever tested or tried, making the situation worse over time.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

You are not imagining it and you are not being dramatic or ungrateful for a life that looks fine from the outside. But the interrogation has no traction. Insight that feels enormous on Tuesday is weightless by Friday.

This is the stage of reading too much. Of long voice notes. Of frameworks that explain everything and change nothing. And of course the numerous personality tests you have completed, some useful, most often not. What is happening is that you are trying to understand yourself using the very framework that is falling apart, like trying to see your own face without a mirror.

It is also why self-help stops working here. Productivity systems, goal-setting, positive thinking: all of them were designed for a self that still felt coherent. They do not work when the self is the thing in question.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

The crisis beneath the crisis is a narrative collapse. Not *"what do I do?"* but *"who am I when the old answer no longer fits?"*

The reason the old map cannot simply be updated is that it has fused with identity. Revising it does not feel like improving a tool. It feels like losing a piece of yourself.

There is one hard finding worth taking seriously here: whilst reflection is useful for avoiding a headlong run in a direction that will not fit, reflection on its own correlates with ***more*** anxiety, not less. Only insight predicts wellbeing and journalling alone does not produce insight. Under high rumination, more reflection actively reduces resilience. Reflection volume is a cost, not a feature. Reflect initially, not endlessly.

> *The models are failing at every level simultaneously. Career frameworks. Management orthodoxies. Identity blueprints. The danger is not that we use maps. The danger is that we forget they are only maps.*
>
> THE LIMINALIST

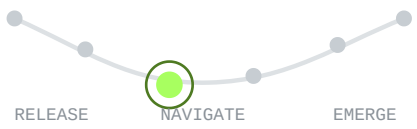
WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

Over-analysis, identity crisis, questioning everything and acting on nothing. You feel you should be doing something, but don't know what.

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Uncertainty Tolerance · Identity Experimentation

YOU ARE HERE



STAGE 03 If the insight does not change what you do this week, it is avoidance wearing a good disguise.

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What the work is

This stage bridges the restless silence of the deep neutral zone and the experimental work that follows. Before you can test anything in real life, you need to establish what actually defines you and what you are genuinely good at. The method is what we call **Identity Archaeology**: not introspection, but evidence from your own past. The exercises are on the next page; what follows here is how to run them honestly.

The distinction that does the work: what you did to get a job done, versus what you kept doing when nobody asked. The first are constructs. The second are constants and make up your signature. Titles, skills, functions and domains are almost always the first. What survived incompatible contexts, what you rebuilt after losing it, what you did off duty with no reward attached, what energises you, sparks your curiosity and raises your eyebrows - that is the second and the only part that transfers.

DO THIS

+ **Harvest the archive first.** Search your own inbox for "thank you for", references, farewell notes, appraisal quotes. The data already exists and costs nothing socially. Look for what recurs, not what flatters. What were you praised for and criticised for? What were you already good at as a teenager and then abandoned? What are people coming to you for? Or recommending you for?
+ **Collect the receipts.** What have you refused to trade even when refusing cost you money, roles or status? What did you want to keep or give up?
+ **Include what energises and what drains you.** What are you demonstrably good at that leaves you with energy? And what are you good at that empties you out?
+ **Do not say no too early.** This is unfamiliar terrain and until proven otherwise every option is viable - especially the ones you had never considered. Ask what the worst realistic outcome would be and write it down. Named, it usually shrinks.

NOT THIS

- **Do not take another personality test.** One or two are useful. Beyond that you are simply confirming that everyone offers assessment and nobody offers movement.
- **Do not go looking for your "one true self".** A cognitive bias with a flattering distortion attached. There is no single true self - there are several and they keep developing. What you can actually find is a set of observed patterns with evidence behind them.
- **Do not force a coherent life story.** We rewrite the past constantly and invent tidy reasons for what we did. Write your thinking down as you go and you get a more honest relationship with your own narrative.
- **Do not get distracted instead of moving.** A CV improved for the hundredth time, or another round of "research" into the job market, is avoidance with a productive face on.
- **Do not ask what you'd do if you couldn't fail.** It surfaces fantasy rather than evidence and it frames fear as the problem when what holds you back is the ego that will not meet it.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

Two to four constants in your own words, with evidence, conditions and a cost.

The questions become testable, things you could try, not think about.

Diminishing returns. Reflection stops producing new information. Looping is data, not progress.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *What did I keep doing when nobody asked me to?*

02 *If I let this go entirely, what am I afraid becomes true about me?*

03 *Finish this: "I am someone who has always…" - no skills, titles or domains allowed.*

04 *What have I done in three completely different contexts that had nothing else in common?*

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Identity archaeology

The exercises. Each one works from evidence - records, behaviour, what other people have told you over the years - rather than from whatever you happen to believe about yourself. Do them in order; the later ones depend on material the earlier ones produce.

10 + 20 MIN, A DAY APART · START HERE

The Two Portraits

Ten minutes: describe yourself fast and unedited, with no audience in mind. Then, on another day, write the introduction a PR professional would write for this person.

The finding is not in either portrait. It is in the **divergences** - where the polished version says "speed" and the raw one says "my own tempo, fast or slow".

Watch for: doing both in one sitting. Keep at least a day between them, or the second portrait copies the first and the divergences disappear.

105 MIN · TWO SEARCHES, THEN SORT

The Archival Witness Harvest

Search your own inbox and records for "thank you for", references, farewell notes, appraisal quotes. Cluster what recurs.

Then and only then ask three people - one personal, one professional, one from an earlier era - one question: *what do you actually come to me for?* Mixed sources. Mixed valence.

Watch for: cherry-picking the warmest ones. Frequency is the signal, not warmth.

2 MIN A DAY FOR TWO WEEKS · THE DISCONFIRMING HALF

The Energy Audit

At the end of each day, up to three entries for what stood out, each rated from -3 (emptied, needed to recover) to +3 (absorbed, did not want to stop). Note the conditions each time: who was there, what constrained you, who wanted it.

Once a week, twenty minutes: which minuses repeat, and is it the same activity or the same conditions? Two weeks of entries are enough to show a pattern.

The rule: energy confirms nothing on its own. It nominates candidates and it falsifies conditions. Track energy rather than argue the point.

WHAT YOU END UP WITH - AND THE FIVE TESTS IT HAS TO PASS

Two to four **constants** in your own words, each with an evidence trail, the conditions it needs and the price you have paid for it - plus a **constructs** list of what was context rather than you. No type, no score, no archetype. Check each candidate against five tests: **1.** it appears in at least three unrelated contexts · **2.** when you lost it, you tried to get it back · **3.** it shows up off duty, unpaid and unasked · **4.** someone else independently names it · **5.** it outlasted the setting that rewarded it. Four or five yes answers: a constant. Three: keep looking. Two or fewer: probably a construct. And a constant without a visible cost is suspect.



What twenty years left on the table.

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04 Experimentation & Prototyping

NAVIGATE / LATE NEUTRAL ZONE

IDENTITY EXPERIMENTATION

You are in motion. Courses, side projects, rich conversations, maybe a new role. From the outside it looks like progress. Inside it can feel like a treadmill.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

You are not stuck the way some people are stuck. You are moving. But something is not clicking and underneath the activity a question is building: *"what if I never find it?"*

Each experiment carries an implicit question - *is this me?* - and when nothing has clicked, it starts to feel as though the answer is simply no. To everything. That is a frightening place to arrive, not because it is true but because it feels true when the results keep coming back inconclusive.

There is a quieter version of the same stage, where the motion is the point. Life looks fine from the outside, you are busy and underneath you sense the busyness is covering something you have not named.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

This is late Neutral Zone, not a new beginning and the distinction is important. Trying on a self is not the same as becoming one. **Trying ≠ becoming.**

The mechanism is simple once you accept it: you have to search in order to know, not the other way round. Small moves produce information your system can absorb. Big leaps produce too much at once and you fall back on the model that used to work.

Effectuation is the decision logic experienced entrepreneurs use under high uncertainty: work from the actions you control and the resources you already have, rather than trying to predict the future. For you this means, instead of *"who should I become?"*, ask: *"given who I am and what I have access to, what becomes possible and what can I afford to lose?"*

> *You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking.*
>
> HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

THE VERSION NOBODY WRITES ABOUT

For some, this stage is the best part. The trying energises rather than drains, several things are alive at once and doing only one for a decade is the unattractive option. For some this is the start of a portfolio working life.

Which way you react is data. Dread at the open-endedness points one way, relief the other.

There is a second return. Meeting new people and doing unfamiliar things widens what Taleb calls optionality: more surface area for a good and fertile accident.

WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

Scattered trying, fear of commitment, sampling without learning.

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Identity Experimentation

YOU ARE HERE



STAGE 04 Trying is not becoming. You do not need more experiments, you need to read the ones you have run.

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What the work is

Before running more experiments, read the ones you have already run. Choose distinct areas from the Identity Archaeology exercises, then test and assess each in turn.

Every experiment leaves information: what felt alive, what felt performed, what you returned to without being told to, what you abandoned without noticing. That information is the data. Most people generate it and never collect it.

The other discipline is honesty to yourself. Before you start, decide what this would have to show you for it to count as a real answer and write it down. Without that, every result confirms whatever you already hoped.

DO THIS

- **Shrink the unit.** What is the smallest version of this you could test in two weeks? Not a big plan, rather a "thing" or "hustle" that happens.
- **Change the language before the label.** Try being "someone who writes" rather than committing to "being a writer". It removes the pressure to perform a fixed identity.
- **Read live options as identity data.** Which of these requires you to become someone different, versus do something different in a new building? Which are you drawn to and which are you merely relieved by? They are not the same.
- **Get mirrors.** Experimentation is not only doing, it is having people who can reflect back what they actually see. Aim to get feedback from outside your closest circle too.
- **Announce it.** Solo private starts often die quietly. A date, a witness, a shared output: that is the method. Treat these as simple experiments to remove the pressure, but tell someone who will follow up with you later.

NOT THIS

- **Do not let exploring become the identity.** There is a point where keeping every door open means walking through none of them. At some point, you will need to make a decision.
- **Do not run experiments without pre-determined criteria and exit rules.** Otherwise you are collecting reassurance, not evidence.
- **Do not generalise an inconclusive result into a verdict about yourself.** "This didn't click" is not "nothing will".
- **Do not optimise the exercise into a project.** Analytically strong people will turn any structured task into sophisticated avoidance through building frameworks, decision matrices or anything else that lets them avoid the thing itself.
- **Do not count "research" or "reflect on" as a commitment.** A commitment has a verb and a date. Be clear on the objective: what will you achieve, by when, this week?

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

You find yourself returning to something without external pressure. That return is the signal.

The aliveness data converges: the same few things keep showing up when you ask when you felt most like yourself.

The identification test flips: from *"it still feels like a costume"* to *"it's starting to feel like mine"*.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *Which of the things I have tried have I come back to without anyone asking?*

02 *Given who I am and what I have access to, what becomes possible?*

03 *Would this be a genuinely new area/field, or the same identity just re-labelled?*

04 *What would this experiment have to show me for it to count as a real answer?*

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Designing experiments you can afford to lose

A career transition is a complex problem rather than a complicated one and the difference is not academic. In complicated problems the right answer exists and can be found in advance. In complex ones the pattern only shows up once you move. That changes what an experiment is *for*.

	FAIL-SAFE	SAFE-TO-FAIL
Assumes	The answer exists and can be found first	Patterns emerge only from action
Investment	Large, single, committed	Small, several, bounded
Failure	A disaster to prevent	Cheap, expected information
Design question	"How do I make sure this works?"	"How do I make sure that if this fails, I'm fine?"

So the design question inverts. You are not building something to succeed; you are building something whose failure you can afford and learn from. Most of the work goes into the downside.

FOUR CONSTRAINTS ON EVERY EXPERIMENT

- **Bounded cost.** Declare before you start what money, hours, reputation and relationship capital you are prepared to lose entirely. That is the budget, not what you hope to gain.
- **Bounded time.** An experiment without an end date is a slow, unexamined commitment. Set the date first.
- **A stated falsifier.** What would this have to show you for it to count as a real answer? If you cannot say in advance what would kill the idea, you are not running an experiment.
- **A way to stop.** Reversibility is what keeps stopping available. An irreversible experiment is not safe-to-fail, however small it looks.

How many

Two to four at once, plus a declared floor. One is not a portfolio - a single bet makes its own failure identity-threatening. More than four and you cannot tell which experiment produced which signal.

How long

A nested cadence. Next step startable within **24 hours**. Each experiment **1–4 weeks**. Portfolio review at **90 days**. Full reorientation at six months. Beginning, end and review all scheduled in advance.

How to decide

Read each on three axes: **traction, energy, payment.** Choose one of four: **continue, adapt, combine, stop.** Decide the signals in advance - in the moment your mind will pick whatever feels most familiar.

FOUR QUESTIONS, FOUR DIFFERENT EXPERIMENTS

Most people run one experiment and expect it to answer everything. It cannot.

- **Is this real?** → conversations with people who actually have the problem.
- **Can I do this?** → the smallest real version, shipped to one person.
- **Do I want this?** → energy tracked across the doing, not predicted before it.
- **Will anyone pay?** → one paid transaction, however small. Free interest is not evidence.

Kegan and Lahey add a fifth that people skip: an experiment testing what you *fear* rather than what you want. *If I let this go entirely, what am I afraid becomes true about me?* That assumption usually holds the pattern in place.

START THIS WEEK

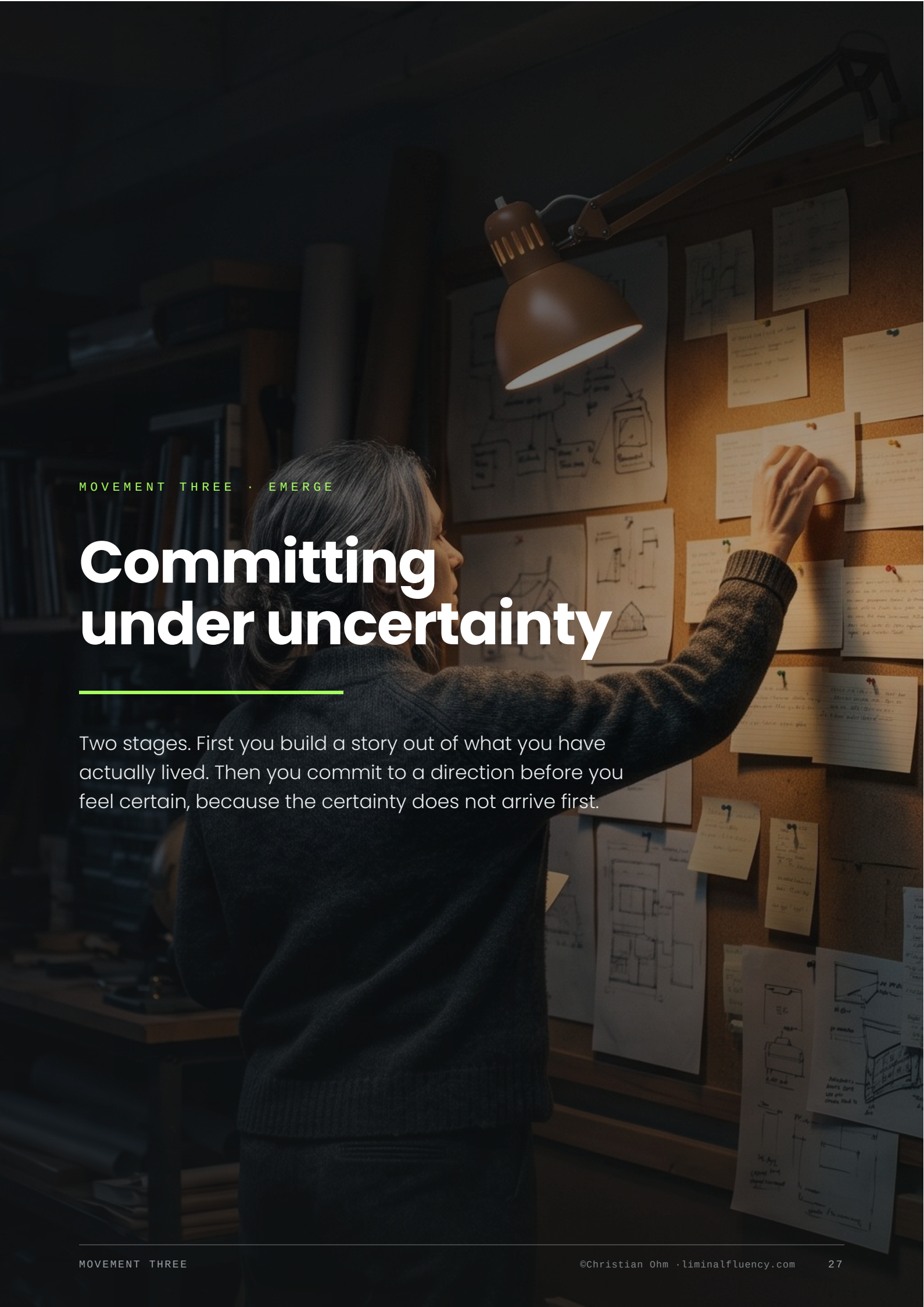
Peak Experiences List - ten times you felt most alive at work. Underline what repeats.

Plan Z - the worst acceptable outcome and whether you could survive it. That is your affordable loss.

Three conversations with people two or three steps ahead. Not peers.

One **minimum viable commitment**: smallest time-bound step, expected obstacle and who will know you said it.

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MOVEMENT THREE · EMERGE

Committing under uncertainty

Two stages. First you build a story out of what you have actually lived. Then you commit to a direction before you feel certain, because the certainty does not arrive first.

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05 Narrative Integration

EMERGE / BRIDGE → EARLY NEW BEGINNING

NARRATIVE COHERENCE

Something new is taking shape. And precisely now, something keeps pulling you back. This is a critical point within your journey and where a new identity starts to form.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

You have done real work to get here. Letting go, sitting in the fog, trying different things. It was not easy and now you are close. Closer than you have been in a long time.

And yet something keeps pulling you back. A voice asking whether you are making a mistake. A sudden longing for the familiarity of what you left. A moment of doubt that arrives precisely when the path ahead looks clearest. You take two steps forward and find yourself looking over your shoulder. You commit and then quietly un-commit.

The reason is simple and rarely said: in the fog there was nothing left to lose. Here, there is. Committing to a new direction means finally closing the door on the old one. And closing that door completely requires something deeper than clarity. It requires grief and guts at the same time: letting go, this time for good.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

This stage is the pivotal moment, because it is where identity starts to form rather than merely being tested. Some people integrate a narrative while still experimenting, liminal but coherent. Others only once they have chosen. Both are normal.

Narrative coherence is what lets you step forward without constantly looking back. Not because the past disappears, but because it becomes part of the story rather than a competing claim on your future.

One methodological difference matters here. Narrative coaching often has you tell a new story and then live into it. The sequence in this framework runs the other way: act experimentally, notice what feels true, then build the story from what you lived.

> *The best stories are vulnerable but not raw. They come from scars, not wounds.*
>
> CATHERINE BURNS, QUOTED IN BRUCE FEILER, LIFE IS IN THE TRANSITIONS

WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

A fragmented story, imposter feelings, an inability to connect the past to the direction. Feeling the new narrative emerging, but not yet being able to fully express it. *Is this it? you ask yourself.*

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Narrative Coherence

YOU ARE HERE



STAGE 05 You do not have to kill the old self to become something new. You carry it forward, transformed and told through an amended narrative.

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What the work is

Integration, not more exploration. Making sense of the journey, consolidating what you learned about yourself and building a story that connects where you have been to where you are going.

There is also a social half that people neglect. You do not only need inner clarity, you need a version of this you can say out loud, at a dinner, to a former colleague, in a first meeting, without collapsing, over-explaining or defending yourself.

DO THIS

- **Title the chapters.** If you named the chapters of your working life so far, what would this one be called? And the next?
- **Tell it twice.** The version you would give a stranger, then the true one. The gap between them is the work. Practise it over and over.
- **Build the public sentence.** One version of this ending you can say in public without justifying yourself. Rehearse it until it is boring.
- **Keep what is still true.** You do not have to kill the former self to become something new. What in the old story is worth carrying forward? And what from the in-between itself is worth keeping?
- **Design the ex-role.** "I am an ex-X in the following useful sense…" People do not become free of a role; they become ex-something and that needs designing.

NOT THIS

- **Do not force redemption too early.** A relentless "it was all for the best" story plot sounds false and in some cultures it reads as evasion. The unresolved parts belong in the story too.
- **Do not accept the tidy version.** A LinkedIn-ready storyline at this stage is a warning sign, not an achievement. Use slightly different future LinkedIn versions of yourself as learning signals instead.
- **Do not demand a story from yourself if you do not work that way.** Not everyone thinks in stories. Nobody is required to produce a coherent life story to move forward.
- **Do not let coherence become a better mask.** The point is to reduce the cost of performing, not to perform more convincingly.
- **Do not read the grief as regression.** It arrives here because you are finally, fully leaving something behind, not because you return to an earlier state.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

You can tell a story that connects your past, your transition and your new direction: imperfect, but honest enough that you feel it when you say it out loud.

The identification test lands: *"this is me now"*. When you describe it, you feel alignment rather than performance.

Other people start repeating your story back to you approximately correctly.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *What possibilities are emerging, even if I can't yet describe them?*

02 *When someone asks what I do - what do I say now and what does it cost me to say it?*

03 *What in the old story is still true and worth carrying?*

04 *What's one sentence of the new story I could actually defend?*



The version you keep
is rarely the first one.

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06 Emergence & Design Forward

EMERGE / THE NEW BEGINNING

COMMITMENT DESIGN

Commitment, re-entry and the deliberate design of a life around the new direction. This is the capacity that ends a transition. Without it you keep circling.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FROM THE INSIDE

The fear changes its shape here. It is no longer *"I don't know who I am."* It is *"if I say this out loud, I can't take it back."* Ambivalence at maximum intensity, precisely because the direction is right.

The looking back is not weakness or indecision. It is your nervous system doing what nervous systems do - checking whether it is safe to release the familiar.

Western culture is unhelpful here too. We celebrate the dramatic leap, the bold pivot, the decisive moment. Real threshold-crossing is usually slower, quieter and more ambivalent than that. The courage required is not the courage of the leap. It is the courage of the slow, deliberate, clear-eyed step, taken while part of you is still looking back.

WHAT'S GOING ON UNDERNEATH

Commitment Design is the ability to make identity-level choices on incomplete information, thus binding yourself to a direction not because you are certain, but because you have learned enough to act.

That distinguishes it from decisiveness (a temperament) and from goal-setting (a planning skill). It is rather the psychological crossing between experimenting and becoming and it is the capacity that decides whether a transition ever ends. You can be excellent at the other five and still cycle indefinitely.

Beginnings also ratify endings with finality. Committing to the new means accepting you cannot go back, which is why unfinished grief tends to resurface here rather than earlier.

> *We're not there yet.*
> *But we're becoming.*
>
> THE LIMINALIST

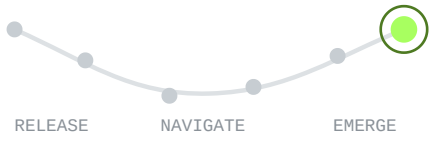
WHAT STUCK HERE LOOKS LIKE

False arrival, premature commitment, avoidance of commitment or quiet back-sliding.

CAPACITIES IN PLAY

Commitment Design

YOU ARE HERE



Inspiration: 初心 · Shoshin. Beginner's mind. Not naivety and not performed humility. It is setting down the expert posture on purpose as you enter something new. Stage 01 asked you to grieve being the one who knew. Stage 06 asks you to hand it back: the authority that made you good in the old role answers before it listens. Kaihō was how you let go. Shoshin is how you arrive.

> *In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.*
>
> SHUNRYU SUZUKI, 1970

STAGE 06 Commit on what you can afford to lose, not on a certainty that is never going to arrive.

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What the work is

Consolidating insight into structures that hold. Routines, relationships, environment, rhythms, the unglamorous architecture that turns a decision into a life.

Note what this stage does not require: quitting. If you are still employed, job crafting belongs here. Redesigning the tasks, the relationships and the terms of your current role around who you now are is a legitimate destination, not a compromise. So is deliberately choosing to stay.

And if a new role is already signed, the frame shifts from *decide well* to *cross cleanly, without importing the unfinished ending*.

DO THIS

- **Commit on affordable loss, not predicted gain.** What can you put in that you could survive losing? Start there.
- **Make it minimum and viable.** The smallest concrete, time-bound step, plus the obstacle you expect and who else will know you said it.
- **Recruit a witness.** Being seen making the commitment is the mechanism that makes it stick. Doing it privately is why most commitments quietly expire.
- **Pre-plan the doubt.** It will come back. Decide now what you will do when it does, so the doubt does not get to make the decision.
- **Define success in your own terms.** Not the market's, not your former employer's, not the version that would impress people you no longer want to impress.

NOT THIS

- **Do not declare false arrival.** Test it honestly: has your actual week changed - routines, relationships, environment - or does the "new you" live mostly in your head?
- **Do not wait for certainty.** At this stage, waiting *is* the avoidance pattern. Certainty is not the prerequisite; it is sometimes the reward.
- **Do not commit as relief.** Grabbing the first thing that feels solid just to end the uncertainty produces a quieter version of the same place, six months later.
- **Do not import the unfinished ending.** Whatever you skipped in stage one arrives in the new role as transition debt.
- **Do not sell yourself a permanent arrival.** There will be another threshold. The point is to meet it with capacity rather than from zero. Be clear about your must-haves for the next role and have an exit strategy ready before you start anywhere else.

HOW YOU KNOW YOU ARE MOVING ON

Integration rather than aspiration: how you spend your time, who you spend it with and what you prioritise have all meaningfully changed.

The commitment survives doubt instead of requiring its absence. *It's scary, but it feels right.*

You can answer "what do you do?" without it costing you anything or without the disturbing feeling you once had.

QUESTIONS WORTH SITTING WITH

01 *What am I willing to commit to before I'm certain?*

02 *What's my own definition of this working?*

03 *Am I entering this as a chosen experiment, or as relief?*

04 *What will I do when the doubt comes back - because it will?*

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Where you are is one thing. How you are relating to it is another.

Six patterns show up again and again. Each points to roughly where you are on the map and more precisely to how you are navigating it. Not a strict ladder - you can be mostly in stage four and still carrying an unfinished piece of stage one - but they do move. Nobody occupies only one profile.

The Holder

RESISTING THE ENDING

USUALLY RELEASE · STAGE 01

You know something needs to change. You might even know what. But letting go feels like losing something you cannot yet afford to lose, so you stay and call it prudence.

Needs: honesty before action. **Trap:** rationalising the hold as virtue.

The Drifter

MOTION WITHOUT TRACTION.

RELEASE INTO EARLY NAVIGATE

Life looks fine from the outside. You are busy, genuinely busy. But underneath you feel strangely untethered and the motion is covering something you have not named.

Needs: to stop long enough to see where you are. **Trap:** motion mistaken for progress.

The Wanderer

IN THE FOG. NOTHING SOLID.

NAVIGATE · STAGES 02–03

Suspended between who you were and who you are becoming. You look for direction and find questions. Everyone offers practical advice aimed at the wrong layer.

Needs: witness and an anchor, not a plan. **Trap:** shortcutting, which extends the stay.

The Silent One

THE UNWITNESSED SHIFT

RELEASE, UNACKNOWLEDGED

Nothing dramatic happened. But everything has quietly shifted and nobody around you quite understands it, largely because you have told almost no one.

Needs: language and one person who hears it. **Trap:** the silence itself.

The Experimenter

TRYING. TESTING. NOT YET CLICKED.

NAVIGATE · STAGE 04

You are doing the right things: trying rather than waiting, testing rather than theorising. But nothing has clicked yet. When you are no longer sure whether you are progressing or just staying busy, doubt can start.

Needs: to read the experiments, not run more. **Trap:** optionality as sophisticated avoidance.

The Threshold Crosser

ALMOST THERE. STILL LOOKING BACK.

EMERGE · STAGES 05–06

You can see where you are heading. Maybe you have already started. But part of you keeps looking back and that pull is real.

Needs: permission to grieve the leaving. **Trap:** falling forward by default, or grabbing the nearest solid thing.

Two that look alike and are not

The Drifter and The Silent One are both still employed and both stuck at the edge of a major change, but they cope in opposite directions. One outruns the ending; the other swallows it. A crisis of anchoring and a crisis of voice.

A superpower and a kryptonite

Most people are good at one part of a transition and poor at another. Some grieve well and cannot tolerate the middle. Some love experimenting and cannot commit. Knowing which tells you where you will get stuck next time.

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What each one needs

The profile points to where you are. It also tells you what kind of help will land and, more usefully, what will bounce off.

PROFILE	THE MOVE THAT HELPS	THE MOVE THAT MAKES IT WORSE
The Holder **Resisting the ending**	Naming what is actually ending, clearly and without minimising it. Acceptance of what is true right now, so the energy spent holding on can be redirected. A different kind of conversation, not more options.	More options. More reassurance that it is fine to wait. Anything that lets prudence keep doing the work of avoidance.
The Drifter **Motion without traction**	Stopping long enough to see where you are. Working out what needs putting down before movement means anything.	Productivity tools and planning frameworks. Precisely the wrong instrument: they add motion to a motion problem.
The Wanderer **In the fog**	Uncertainty tolerance, framed as active rather than passive. A companion and genuine witness. An anchor more fundamental than a job title.	Being rushed. Advice aimed at the practical layer when the question is existential. Any framework that requires you to already know the goal.
The Silent One **The unwitnessed shift**	Witness first. Then language. Naming is not solving, but it is the beginning of not being alone with it.	"But you have a good job." Every well-meant dismissal confirms the fear that the experience is not real and you are the problem.
The Experimenter **Trying without clicking**	Reading the experiments already run, rather than running more. Deciding what *not* to do. Prioritise. Focus & Abandon. Moving from navigation to commitment under uncertainty.	More ideas, more experiments, more optionality. Anything that rewards keeping every door open and so prevents you from prioritising.
The Threshold Crosser **Almost through**	Integration rather than more exploration. Permission to grieve the leaving - which is what actually closes the door. Accompaniment across.	Being told to just decide. And its opposite: being encouraged to explore a bit longer when the exploring is finished.

PROFILE AND STAGE ARE DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

The stage is where the weight currently sits. The profile is how you are holding it. Someone can be an Experimenter in behaviour while the unfinished work is still sitting in stage one - which is, in fact, the most common configuration there is.

None of these is a personality

They are postures rather than types. They change - sometimes within a single week - and most people carry a dominant one with a second sitting underneath it. The second is usually the more useful of the two, because it is the one nobody has been treating.

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Locating yourself, honestly.

Reading six descriptions and picking the flattering one is not a diagnosis. Three things make it one.

Start with the Diagnostic. It names your profile in about five minutes and the three checks below are how you pressure-test the answer.

Start with the discomfort, not the resonance. The one that is genuinely yours is usually the one you would rather not have picked. If a profile made you want to move past it quickly, start there.

Check the behaviour, not the self-description. Not what you believe about yourself, but what the last month actually contained. What did you do? What did you avoid? What did you research instead of doing?

Expect to be more than one. Most people are a dominant pattern with a second one underneath.

The three questions that locate most people

01 *If the old role were offered back tomorrow on the same terms, what would I feel in the first two seconds?*

02 *In the past month, what did I do that was concrete and outward-facing, rather than research, planning or thinking?*

03 *Who have I actually told the truth about this to, out loud, in my own words?*

A heartbeat "yes" to the first points at unfinished endings. "Nothing" to the second points at inquiry or drift. "No one" to the third points at a silent transition, whatever else is true.



Three paths, one standing point, first light.

OR HAVE IT DONE FOR YOU

The Liminal Fluency Diagnostic is a free, eleven-question instrument that returns your profile and your dominant movement, with the reasoning behind it. It takes about five minutes.

It is deliberately not a personality test. It does not tell you who you are. It tells you where you currently are - the question personality tests cannot answer and keep being asked to.

liminalfluency.com · Discover your Transition Profile (link)

A note on what this cannot do. This guide and the Diagnostic behind it are coaching instruments. They are not therapy and not a clinical assessment. If you are experiencing persistent inability to function, severe or prolonged depression, panic, trauma symptoms or any thoughts of harming yourself, the right next step is a specialised professional, not a framework. That is not a lesser route. Where it is needed it is the one that works and nothing in this guide is a substitute for it.

> *Wherever you land on that - you are not behind. There is no schedule for this kind of work. What matters is that you are paying attention to it now.*
>
> THE LIMINALIST

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Things to remember.

01 **Change is situational. Transition is psychological.**

The event has a date. The reorientation does not. Most distress comes from applying the first clock to the second.

02 **Every transition starts at the ending.**

Not at the new beginning. Skip the ending and it travels with you into the next thing.

03 **The middle is most of the journey, not a gap in it.**

Three to five major transitions in an adult life, three to seven years each. It is normal.

04 **Clarity comes from doing, not planning.**

Your story, your gut signals and your sense of what fits are all built out of experience. Without new experience there is nothing for them to work on.

05 **Why you are this tired.**

Running two versions of yourself at once is expensive. That is the dual load and rest does not fix it.

06 **Naming it changes it.**

Half the difficulty is invisibility. “This is the in-between” is not a solution, but it is comfort in the discomfort.

07 **Trying is not becoming.**

The middle ends when you identify with a new self, not when you try one on. Confusing the two is the most common misread there is.

08 **Excavate evidence, not feelings.**

What you kept doing when nobody asked. What you rebuilt after losing it. What you refused even when refusing cost you.

09 **Design experiments you can afford to lose.**

Bounded cost, bounded time, a stated falsifier and a way to stop. Two to four experiments at once, no more.

10 **Insight is not movement.**

If it does not change what you do this week, it is avoidance wearing a good disguise. The most sophisticated form of being stuck looks exactly like doing the work.

11 **Commit before certainty arrives.**

Not because you are sure, but because you have learned enough to act. Waiting for the perfect solution is the avoidance pattern at the end.

12 **There will be another threshold.**

The point is not to finish transitions. It is to meet the next one with learned capacity and more confidence than the last time you faced it. You will not start from zero again.

> *Ultimately, we all live navigating between spaces, sometimes (most) unaware of the opportunity this presents to our capacity to grow, shift and self-create constantly.*
>
> A LIMINALIST READER

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One page of this is worth more than all of it.

Knowing where you are changes what the next move should be and often, people are working on the wrong stage.

The most common pattern I see is someone doing stage four work - experiments, applications, side projects, conversations - while the unfinished business is still sitting in stage one, which is why the effort produces so little movement and why working harder makes it worse rather than better. They are not lazy and they are not confused. They are on the wrong layer.

So: this week, one thing. Name what actually ended, if that is where the weight is. Or run the smallest possible experiment, if you have been reading for a year. Or tell one person the truth, if you have told nobody. The stage you are in decides which is yours.

Liminality was always available. For some reason we assumed we could do without it.

CHRISTIAN OHM

THE WORK, IN FIVE STEPS

01 The Diagnostic

Free. Five minutes. Your profile and your dominant movement, with the reasoning behind it.

02 The Exercise Guide

The companion to this guide. Thirty exercises, one set for each stage, with worksheets you write on. Where this guide tells you where you are, that one is the doing.

03 The Transition Map Session

One conversation. Your map, your patterns and the next moves that fit where you actually are. The starting point.

04 The Foundation Programme · four sessions

Going deeper: locating you, working the ending, reviewing your past and any personality tests you have done, then building the first real experiments. For people who want to do this once and do it well. A longer Deep Dive Programme goes further.

05 The Modules

Standalone deep-dives, exercise kits and supporting materials, each available on its own.

EVERYTHING IN ONE PLACE

www.liminalfluency.com/products

> *It's not the uncertainty that scares me. It's that I don't know who I am in it.*
>
> A LIMINALIST READER

Where the claims come from.

Principal sources

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Also drawn on

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