Contents

LIVING WITH ZERO

Getting All You Can't from Your Money and Your Life

Owen Nothing

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The stories and characters in this book are composites drawn from real experiences and publicly available data. Names and identifying details have been changed. Any resemblance to specific individuals is coincidental.

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"The poorest among us… are probably already doing all they can to get the most out of their money and their life." —*Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero

Cool. Thanks, Bill. Here's how.

A Note from the Author

When you read "I" in this book, you're hearing a real person who has stared at a banking app at 2 a.m. wondering how the math went wrong again. The specific stories — the flat tire, the break room, the Waffle House parking lot — are composites drawn from real experiences and the experiences of millions of people in similar situations. The details are illustrative. The math is real. The feeling is universal.

If you've been poor, you'll recognize every scenario in this book. If you haven't, you'll learn something. Either way, the playbook is the same: here's where you are, here's what's working against you, and here's what you can actually do about it.

One more thing. The ideal version of this book would have every chapter annotated by people who've lived it — their corrections, their additions, their "actually, here's what it's really like" in the margins. If you're reading this and you *have* been there, your voice belongs in the next edition. The framework is a start. Your experience is the proof.

Let's get into it.

Introduction: You're Already Dying With Zero

"The business of life is the acquisition of memories. In the end, that's all there is." —*Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
"The business of my life is making sure my electricity stays on." —*Overheard in the checkout line at Dollar General*

The Book That Wasn't for You

In 2020, a billionaire energy trader named Bill Perkins published a book called *Die With Zero*. The thesis was elegant: stop hoarding money, start spending it on experiences, and aim to die with your bank account as close to zero as possible. Maximize your "life energy." Create "memory dividends." Don't be the richest corpse in the cemetery.

It was a bestseller. People loved it. Financial influencers quoted it. Tech bros put it on their shelves next to *The 4-Hour Workweek* and a $300 bottle of Japanese whisky they were saving for the right occasion.

And somewhere in a break room in Dayton, Ohio, a home health aide making $11.50 an hour scrolled past the title on her phone during her fifteen-minute lunch and thought: *I'm already dying with zero, man. I didn't need a book to tell me how.*

That's this book.

Not because it's a takedown. Perkins isn't wrong, exactly — he's just speaking a language that roughly 40% of America doesn't have the vocabulary for. When the Federal Reserve reports that 37% of Americans can't cover a $400 emergency without borrowing or

selling something, "optimize your experience spending" lands a little differently. It's like telling someone who's drowning to work on their backstroke.

Die With Zero is a book about what to do with surplus. *Live With Zero* is a book about what to do without any.

Who This Book Is For

Let's be specific, because personal finance books love to say they're "for everyone" and then spend 300 pages talking about index funds and Roth IRA contribution limits.

This book is for you if:

You've done the math and it doesn't math. You work full-time — maybe more than full-time — and you still can't build a cushion. Not because you're buying avocado toast or whatever the current scapegoat food is. Because your rent is $1,200, your take-home is $1,800, and the remaining $600 has to cover a car payment, insurance, gas, food, a phone, and whatever fresh hell your landlord or your body or the state of your transmission decides to spring on you this month. You've tried the budget spreadsheets. The spreadsheets assumed you had margin. You don't have margin. You have math that doesn't work.

You're one emergency away from a catastrophe. Not a theoretical one. A specific, detailed catastrophe you've already rehearsed in your head. You know exactly how the dominoes fall: your kid gets an ear infection, so you miss a shift for the urgent care visit, so you lose hours, so you can't cover the $75 copay and rent in the same paycheck, so you pay rent late, so you get a late fee, and now you have two problems where you used to have one. Or the car breaks down. Or the landlord raises the rent. The specifics rotate; the cascade is always the same. You've run this simulation a hundred times. Some months it's not a simulation.

You grew up without a financial floor. Nobody taught you about credit scores, compound interest, or the difference between a traditional and Roth IRA — and by the time you figured out these were things you were supposed to know, you were already behind. You didn't inherit money, connections, or even the assumption that the system was supposed to work for you. Your starting line was

behind everyone else's, and the race was already in progress when you showed up.

You've heard all the advice and none of it was for you. "Pay yourself first." "Live below your means." "Build a six-month emergency fund." You've heard it. You've nodded politely. You've felt the particular rage of being told to "just save 20% of your income" when 20% of your income is the gap between keeping and losing your apartment. Every personal finance book, podcast, and TikTok guru assumes a starting line you haven't reached yet — a steady income, employer benefits, a credit score above 600, and enough margin to "optimize." You don't need optimization. You need oxygen.

If any of that landed, keep reading. This book was written for the gap between where the advice starts and where you actually are.

What This Book Isn't

Before we go any further, let me save you some time by telling you what this isn't.

This is not a get-rich-quick book. There is no secret formula. Nobody is going to reveal "the one thing millionaires don't want you to know." (They don't want you to know that they started with money. That's the thing. Mystery solved.) This is a book about getting from zero to not-zero, and then from not-zero to something resembling stability. That's it. That's the ambition. If you want to become a millionaire, there are nine hundred books for that and most of them are lying to you.

This is not a budgeting lecture. Budgeting assumes you have enough income to allocate. Below a certain threshold, there's nothing to budget — there's only triage. We'll talk about triage.

This is not poverty porn. We're not going to wallow. We're not going to linger on suffering for dramatic effect or use your hardship as a backdrop for someone else's redemption arc. The situations in this book are presented matter-of-factly, because that's how you experience them — not as dramatic plot points, but as Tuesday.

This is not a mindset book. Your problem is not your attitude. Your problem is that you don't have enough money and the systems around you are designed to keep it that way. We'll talk about the psychological effects of poverty — they're real and they matter — but

we will not, at any point, suggest that you can affirmation-journal your way out of a $9,000 medical bill.

This is not a political manifesto. It has political implications, because poverty in America is a policy choice, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest. But this book is more interested in what you can do *right now* than in what Congress should do eventually. You can't eat policy reform.

This is not a book that requires reading *Die With Zero*. The structural conceit of this book — inverting Perkins' framework — is a lens, not a prerequisite. You don't need to know what a "time bucket" is to understand that your planning horizon extends to next Friday. The Perkins stuff is seasoning. The meal is the playbook.

The Perkins Inversion

Here's how this book works.

Bill Perkins wrote eleven chapters, each organized around a principle of wealth optimization. Things like "Invest in Experiences," "Know Your Peak," "Give Money to Your Kids." Good advice if you have money, a career arc, and kids who aren't already supporting you.

Each chapter of this book takes one of those principles and inverts it. Not to mock it — though some mockery may occur — but to ask: *What does this look like from the other side?*

"Optimize your life energy" becomes: *You don't have life energy, you have survival energy.*

"Invest in experiences" becomes: *Your experiences are called surviving.*

"Die with zero" becomes: *You're already living with zero — the goal is to stop.*

The inversion isn't just a bit. It's a diagnostic tool. When you flip a piece of advice designed for the top half and see what it looks like from the bottom half, you learn something about both. You see where the assumptions hide. You see which advice scales down and which advice quietly assumes a safety net that millions of people don't have.

Underneath every inversion, this book builds three things:

1. **The systemic reality.** Why things cost what they cost when you're poor. Why the game is tilted. Not to make you feel

hopeless — to make you feel informed. You can't navigate a rigged system if you don't know where the rigging is.

2. **The practical playbook.** Concrete tactics that work at poverty-level resources. Not "save 20% of your income" but "here's how to build a $500 emergency fund when you have $11 of discretionary income per week." Every tactic is reality-tested against the constraint of actually being broke. If it requires resources you don't have, it's not in the playbook.
3. **The bigger picture.** Because individual tactics matter, but so does understanding the machine. Poverty in America isn't a character flaw or a temporary setback for most people who experience it — it's a structural feature of how the economy works. You should know that, not so you feel helpless, but so you stop blaming yourself for a math problem that was rigged before you sat down.

Every chapter has all three layers. The satire is the entry point. The tactics are the value. The systemic analysis is the context. And if I've done this right, you'll occasionally laugh at something that makes you a little angry, and that anger will be useful rather than corrosive.

How to Read This Book

You can read it front to back. That's how it's designed — each chapter builds on the last, and the playbook accumulates.

But if you're in crisis mode and need the practical stuff now, here's a shortcut:

- **Drowning right now?** Jump to Appendix A ("The Actual Playbook") for the quick-reference version, then come back and read the full chapters when you have breathing room.
- **Need specific help?** Appendix B ("Resources That Don't Suck") has curated programs and organizations by category — food, housing, healthcare, emergency cash, legal aid.
- **Just need to laugh at something?** Appendix C ("What to Say When Someone Tells You to 'Just Budget Better' ") is the cathartic one.

For everyone else: start here, read forward, and keep a pen handy. Not because you need to take notes to pass a test, but because some of the tactics in this book work better when you write down the

specific numbers for your situation. There are moments where I'll ask you to do actual math — not because I enjoy math, but because the math is the weapon. When you can see the actual numbers, you stop feeling crazy and start feeling strategic.

What Happens Next

Here's the journey we're about to take.

We start with **Part I: The Rules Are Different Down Here**, where we establish why standard financial advice fails below a certain income threshold, break down the poverty penalty in full detail, and begin building the first pieces of a real foundation. By the end of Part I, you'll understand exactly what's working against you, and you'll have started the $500 emergency fund that changes everything.

From there, **Part II: The Game They Forgot to Tell You About** tackles the stuff nobody puts on a whiteboard — time poverty, generational disadvantage, and what "risk" actually means when you have no safety net. By the end, you'll have identified which specific structural disadvantages are costing you the most and built a strategy for each one.

Part III: Building Something From Nothing is where we expand the horizon. We'll build a career trajectory from wherever you are right now and learn to triage spending so that every dollar that isn't keeping you alive is aimed at changing your trajectory. By the end of Part III, you'll have a 90-day plan and you'll be able to see the path forward — maybe for the first time.

Finally, **Part IV: The Way Out (Or At Least, Further In)** defines what "enough" looks like for you specifically, builds a framework for climbing the hierarchy of financial needs, and then sets the satirical lens aside so the last chapter can speak to you directly. By the end of Part IV, you close this book with a plan.

That's a lot to carry. But you've been carrying a lot already — the difference is that now you have a map.

Let's start with why everything costs more when you can't afford anything.

Turn the page.

Part I: The Rules Are Different Down Here

Chapter 1: Optimize Your Life Energy

(You Don't Have Life Energy. You Have Survival Energy.)

"Your life energy is your most precious resource. Money is simply a way of trading your life energy." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero

"I make $11.50 an hour. Please do not talk to me about trading." — *Overheard at a Waffle House in Memphis, 2019*

The Hook

Here is a thing that actually happened to me. I got a flat tire on a Tuesday. The tire itself was $87 at the cheapest place I could find, which was a forty-minute drive from my apartment because I lived in one of those neighborhoods where everything useful is forty minutes away. But I didn't have $87. I had $34 in my checking account, which was technically $9 because I'd written a check for the electric bill that hadn't cleared yet, and I needed gas to get to work for the rest of the week, and I was already doing that math — the grim, constant, soul-pulverizing arithmetic of being broke — where you subtract what you owe from what you have and the answer is a negative number and then you just sit there for a minute staring at the dashboard.

So I bought a $14 can of Fix-a-Flat from the gas station two blocks away. It held for three days. Then the tire went again, this time on the highway, which cost me a $95 tow because I didn't have AAA because AAA is $60 a year and sixty dollars a year is a thing you cut when you're trying to keep the lights on. The tire shop now quoted me $112 because the rim was damaged from driving on the Fix-a-Flat. Grand total for not having $87: two hundred and twenty-one dollars, a day of missed work, and a blood pressure spike I could feel in my teeth.

Bill Perkins would call this a suboptimal allocation of life energy. I would call it a Tuesday.

The Inversion

Perkins' central thesis in *Die With Zero* is elegant and, for a certain tax bracket, genuinely useful: money is a stand-in for your life energy. Every dollar you earn represents time you spent working instead of living. Therefore, the great optimization problem of your life is figuring out the best exchange rate — how to convert your money into the maximum amount of fulfillment, joy, and "memory dividends" before you die.

It's a beautiful framework. It assumes you have money.

Not money in the Scrooge McDuck swimming-in-gold-coins sense. Perkins isn't writing for billionaires. He's writing for people who have *enough* — enough that the fundamental question of their financial life is "What should I do with what I have?" He's writing for people whose money is sitting there, waiting to be optimized, like a well-stocked pantry that just needs a better recipe.

But roughly 40% of Americans are not staring at a well-stocked pantry. They're staring at an empty shelf with a box of expired baking soda and a single condiment of unknown origin, trying to figure out whether they can make a meal out of ketchup and optimism. For these people — for *us*, if we're being honest about who's reading this book — the question is not "How do I maximize joy per dollar?" The question is "How do I stop losing money I don't have?"

This is the distinction that well-meaning financial advice almost always misses. Perkins talks about life energy as though it's a currency you can spend strategically. But when you're poor, your life

energy isn't a currency. It's a *tax*. You're not trading it for experiences and memory dividends. You're burning it just to maintain your position, like a hamster on a wheel that's also somehow on fire.

The optimization problem for people with money is: *maximize the return*. The optimization problem for people without money is: *minimize the drain*.

These are not the same problem. They're not even in the same zip code. One is investing. The other is triage. And if you try to apply investing logic to a triage situation, you will bleed out while calculating your ROI.

So let's talk about the bleeding.

The Reality: The Poverty Penalty, or Why Being Poor Is the Most Expensive Thing You'll Ever Do

Here's a number you already know in your body, even if you've never done the math: a family of four without a washer and dryer spends roughly $1,248 a year at the laundromat — about $4 a load, six loads a week. A basic washer-dryer set costs around $800 and pays for itself in eight months. But you need $800 at once, plus an apartment with hookups, which costs more, which you can't afford, so you keep feeding quarters into a machine at the strip mall. You spend *more* because you have *less*. Every week. Every year. And the gap just widens.

Terry Pratchett turned this into what he called the Boots Theory of Socioeconomic Unfairness — the rich man buys $50 boots that last a decade, the poor man buys $10 boots that fall apart in a season, and after ten years the poor man has spent twice as much and still has wet feet. It's a tidy summary. But you don't need the parable. You've been living the math.

The poverty penalty is the extra money you pay for being poor. Not figuratively. Literally. The system charges you more — for banking, for food, for insurance, for credit, for transportation, for the privilege of existing without a financial cushion. It's a surcharge on survival, and it is relentless.

Let me walk you through it.

The Banking Penalty

About 5.9 million American households are "unbanked" — per the FDIC's 2021 survey, they don't have a checking or savings account. Another 18.7 million are "underbanked," meaning they have an account but still rely on alternative financial services because the account doesn't actually meet their needs. These are people who've been burned by overdraft charges, minimum-balance fees, and account closures — people whose relationship with the banking system is roughly equivalent to a cat's relationship with a bathtub.

If you don't have a bank account, you cash your paycheck at a check-cashing store. These places charge 1% to 5% of the face value of the check. That's not an annoyance. That's a tax on earning money. If you make $30,000 a year and you're cashing every check at 3%, that's $900 a year just to access the money you already earned. If you're at the high end — 5% — that's $1,500. You are paying rent to touch your own paycheck.

If you *do* have a bank account but you're living close to the bone, there's the overdraft trap. The average overdraft fee is about $35. The average person who overdrafts does it multiple times a year. The median transaction that triggers an overdraft is $24 — meaning you effectively paid $59 for $24 worth of stuff, a 246% markup that would make a loan shark blush.

Banks made roughly $6.1 billion in overdraft and NSF fees in 2022, according to the CFPB. Every dollar of that came from the people who have the least of it.

The Credit Penalty

If your credit score is bad — and it's probably bad, because credit scores are basically a formalized system for punishing people for having been poor before — you pay more for everything that involves credit.

Car insurance: In most states, insurers can use your credit score to set your premiums. Bad credit can increase your car insurance rate by 40% to 115%, depending on the state. Not because you're a worse driver. Because a model somewhere decided that people who've missed payments are statistically more likely to file claims. Whether or not that's true, the result is that you pay more to insure the car you need to get to the job that doesn't pay you enough to improve

your credit score. It's a feedback loop that would be impressive if it weren't destroying people.

Housing deposits: Bad credit means higher security deposits, sometimes two or three months' rent instead of one — or being denied housing entirely, pushing you into a downward spiral of worse apartments, worse landlords, and worse credit.

Interest rates: If you can get credit at all, you're paying double-digit interest rates on everything. A person with a 750 credit score gets a car loan at 4%. A person with a 580 gets the same loan at 15%. On a $15,000 used car over five years, that's the difference between paying $1,600 in interest and paying $6,400. The poor person pays four thousand dollars more for the same car. Not a better car. The same car.

The Cash Penalty

When you're broke, you buy things in the most expensive way possible, because the cheap way requires money you don't have upfront.

Bulk buying: A 36-pack of toilet paper at Costco costs about $0.65 per roll. A 4-pack at the dollar store costs about $1.00 per roll — roughly 50% more for buying small. But Costco requires a membership ($65/year) and the ability to spend $25 on toilet paper at once, neither of which is a given when you're making $80 last until Friday. Across an entire household's worth of consumable goods, the inability to buy in bulk costs 5.5% to 40% more per unit. Over a year, for a family, that's hundreds of dollars extra for the exact same stuff.

Laundry: The laundromat math from earlier — $1,248 a year versus an $800 washer-dryer that pays for itself in eight months. You see where this goes.

Transportation: This one is a masterpiece of structural cruelty. If you can't afford a reliable car, you drive a cheap one that breaks down. Breakdowns cost money. They also cost you shifts, which costs you income, which means you can't afford a reliable car. If you can't afford a car at all, you take public transit, which in most American cities adds one to three hours to your daily commute, which is time — life energy, in Perkins' framework — that you are spending purely on logistics. An hourly worker spending two extra hours a day on buses is losing about $4,800 a year in potential earnings (at $12/hour),

plus the sheer physical and psychological cost of spending ten hours a week waiting at bus stops.

The Time Penalty (The One Nobody Talks About)

The Bandwidth Tax: What Poverty Does to Your Brain

Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir wrote a book called *Scarcity* that should be required reading for anyone who has ever said the words "poor people just need to make better decisions." Their research found that poverty doesn't just take your money. It takes your *cognitive bandwidth*.

When you're constantly managing scarcity — juggling which bills to pay, calculating whether you can afford groceries or gas, making sixteen small financial decisions a day that a person with a cushion never has to make — your brain literally functions as though you've lost 13 IQ points. Not because you're less intelligent. Because your processing power is being consumed by the constant emergency of being broke.

Thirteen IQ points. That's the difference between a normal night's sleep and pulling an all-nighter. That's the cognitive equivalent of being chronically sleep-deprived, except you can't catch up on it, because the scarcity doesn't take a weekend off.

I know. I'm throwing a lot of numbers and studies at you. Stay with me — the research matters because it proves what you already suspected: the problem was never your intelligence or your effort. The game was rigged at the level of your brain chemistry.

This is why "just make a budget" is such spectacularly unhelpful advice. It's not that budgeting is bad. It's that you're asking someone who's running at reduced cognitive capacity — because they're poor — to execute a complex ongoing planning task — because they're poor — with almost zero margin for error — because they're poor. Technically correct. Practically useless. The person isn't failing to swim well — they're failing to not drown.

We'll reference this research throughout the book — it's the foundation for understanding why standard advice fails.

The poverty penalty, taken in aggregate, costs low-income Americans thousands of dollars a year. One analysis found that being poor can cost an extra $2,500 to $5,000 annually in fees, penalties, and markups compared to someone with a moderate financial cush-

ion. That's not money spent on bad decisions or luxuries. That's the surcharge for not having a buffer. It's the subscription fee for being broke, and you can't cancel it, and there's no free trial, and the customer service line puts you on hold for forty minutes and then disconnects.

This is what I mean when I say you don't have life energy. You have survival energy. Life energy is what you spend on choices. Survival energy is what you spend on the absence of them. And the system — the overdraft fees, the credit penalties, the inability to buy in bulk, the crumbling car, the laundromat math — is designed, or at least structured, to extract maximum survival energy from the people who have the least of it.

Perkins wants you to optimize the exchange rate between money and fulfillment. Before you can even get to that equation, you have to stop paying the penalty for not having money. You have to plug the leaks in a boat that's taking on water from every direction.

So let's talk about how to do that.

The Playbook: Plugging the Leaks

Here's what I know about financial advice for people who are actually broke: most of it is written by people who aren't. The tactics below are built for a specific person: someone making between $0 and $30,000 a year, with little to no savings, possibly no bank account, and a to-do list that's really just a list of small financial fires. These aren't hacks. They're not going to make you rich. They're going to reduce the poverty penalty — stop some of the bleeding — so that eventually, maybe, you can get to a place where optimization even becomes possible.

Every tactic includes what it costs, what it gets you, and when it doesn't work. Because nothing works for everyone, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.

1. Get Banked (Even If Banks Have Burned You Before)

What it costs: 30-60 minutes, $0 **What it gets you:** $900-$1,500/year saved on check-cashing fees **When it doesn't work:** If

you have a ChexSystems record from a previous account closure and can't get it resolved

If you're cashing checks at a check-cashing place, this is the single highest-return move you can make. Not because banks are wonderful — banks would charge you for breathing if they could meter it — but because check-cashing fees are a tax you can entirely eliminate.

The move: Open a second-chance checking account, designed for people denied traditional accounts due to a negative ChexSystems record (the banking industry's blacklist for prior account closures). Options include:

- **Chime** (online, no minimum balance, no overdraft fees on small amounts, no monthly fee)
- **Local credit unions** — many have second-chance programs. Credit unions are less likely to treat you like a revenue source with legs. Ask specifically about fresh-start accounts.
- **Bank On-certified accounts** — a national certification for low-fee, no-overdraft-penalty accounts. Search "Bank On" plus your city.

If you have a ChexSystems record, request your report for free, dispute anything inaccurate, and know that records fall off after five years. Set up direct deposit if your employer offers it — this eliminates the check-cashing fee entirely and often waives monthly account fees.

The bottom line: At $30,000 a year and 3% check-cashing fees, you're paying $900 annually for the privilege of getting paid. That's money going to a guy behind bulletproof glass in a strip mall, and it could go to you.

2. Kill the Overdraft

What it costs: 15 minutes, $0 **What it gets you:** $100-$500+/year saved on overdraft and NSF fees **When it doesn't work:** If you're already so deep in the overdraft cycle that turning it off would bounce payments on essentials

Call your bank. Turn off overdraft "protection." (Calling overdraft fees "protection" is like calling a mugging "surprise exercise.") What it actually does is let transactions go through when you don't have the money, then charge you $35. Without it, your debit card gets declined — embarrassing but free. Declined transactions are awkward. They are not $35 awkward.

Some accounts now offer small overdraft cushions ($50-$200) with no fee — Chime and some credit unions do this. If you're choosing a new account, look for this feature.

If you're currently in an overdraft hole, go into the bank and ask about a fee reversal. Banks will often reverse one or two fees per year if you ask. They won't advertise this. Be polite, be direct: "I'm having a hard month. Is there any way to reverse this fee?" The success rate is higher than you'd think.

3. Build the $500 Emergency Fund (The Most Important Number in This Book)

What it costs: Time. Probably months. A slow grind that feels pointless until it suddenly doesn't. **What it gets you:** A fundamentally different relationship with emergencies. **When it doesn't work:** When your income doesn't cover basic expenses and there's no surplus to save — in which case the priority is increasing income or decreasing expenses (see later chapters).

Five hundred dollars. That's the number. Not $10,000, not three-to-six months of expenses (that advice can go directly to hell). Five hundred dollars.

Why this number: $500 in accessible savings is the threshold where financial emergencies stop becoming financial catastrophes. The Fed's annual survey found that 37% of Americans can't cover an unexpected $400 expense without borrowing. With $500, you're on the other side of that statistic.

It covers a car repair, an ER copay, a missed shift, a broken appliance, the gap between paychecks when something goes wrong. It doesn't cover a job loss or a totaled car. It covers the small-to-medium emergencies that, without a cushion, cascade into disasters. The flat tire becomes a tow becomes a missed shift becomes a short paycheck becomes a late fee becomes… you get it. You've lived it. The $500 breaks the cascade.

How to build it when you have nothing to spare:

The Drip Method. Save a specific small dollar amount from every paycheck. Five dollars. Ten dollars. If $5 per paycheck sounds pathetically small: that's $130 a year. At $10 biweekly, you hit $260. It's slow. It works. Automate it — set up an automatic transfer on payday to a separate savings account, ideally at a different institution so it's mildly inconvenient to access. The inconvenience is the point.

The Found Money Method. Tax refund. Birthday money. Gift cards you can sell. Overtime pay. Plasma donation money ($50-$75 per donation; twice a week at most centers, though your body will have opinions about this). Any money outside your normal income goes straight to the fund. Do not let it touch your checking account. Do not "just this once" yourself.

The Expense Audit. I know — I just told you "just make a budget" is bad advice. This is different. Spend one hour looking at last month's transactions and find one recurring expense you can cut. One. Not ten. Common candidates: a forgotten streaming service ($7-$15/month), an unused subscription, bank fees you could eliminate by switching accounts. Redirect whatever you save to the fund.

Where to keep it: A high-yield savings account at an online bank or credit union. Not under your mattress (fire, theft, temptation). Not in your checking account (it will get spent). Currently pays 4-5% interest, which on $500 is about $25 a year — not life-changing, but free money is free money.

The psychology of $500: Nobody tells you this, but the emergency fund doesn't just change your finances — it changes your *brain*. The Scarcity research, the bandwidth tax, the constant low-level panic of no buffer? The $500 turns the volume down. People who've built their first emergency fund describe it in terms that sound dramatic until you've been there: "I could breathe." "I stopped having the money nightmares." "I didn't panic when my kid got sick."

Five hundred dollars. Not because it solves poverty. Because it breaks the cascade — the thing where one flat tire becomes a financial avalanche.

4. Audit the Recurring Bleed

What it costs: 1-2 hours, $0 **What it gets you:** $50-$300+/month in reduced expenses **When it doesn't work:** When you've already cut to the bone and there's genuinely nothing left to trim

Once the emergency fund is underway, identify where money leaks out in predictable, recurring ways — not because you're irresponsible, but because the system creates small, persistent charges you eventually stop noticing.

Late fees. The issue usually isn't irresponsibility — it's cash flow timing. Bills due on the 1st, paycheck on the 7th, a week's gap costing $25-$40 per bill per month. The fix: call every biller and ask to change your due date to align with your pay schedule. Free. Twenty minutes. Hundreds saved per year.

Insurance. Call your car and renters insurance companies (you should have renters insurance — $10-$20/month covers you if your apartment floods or burns, events that will financially annihilate you without it). Ask for every discount: low-mileage, paperless billing, bundling. Ask if they can re-run your rate. Get quotes from two competitors and mention them when you call back. Annoying. Takes an afternoon. Can save $200-$600 a year on car insurance alone.

Phone plan. Paying more than $25-$35/month? You're overpaying. Mint Mobile, Visible, and US Mobile offer plans in that range on major networks. The Lifeline program provides free or subsidized plans for people below 135% of the federal poverty level — check LifelineSupport.org. If you qualify, that's $300-$600 a year back.

Food. Food advice for poor people often sounds like "just eat rice and beans and stop complaining," which makes you want to throw a shoe at someone. So: the biggest food-cost lever isn't what you eat — it's what you *throw away.* The average household wastes 30-40% of what it buys, usually because people buy things they don't get around to cooking. The one-degree adjustment: before the store, check your fridge and pantry, make a list of what you actually need. At $200-$300/month in groceries, that can save $60-$120/month.

If you're eligible for SNAP, apply. There is no shame in it, and I say that knowing the shame is there anyway because the system is designed to make you feel it. Apply anyway. Benefits average about $234/month per person. Dial 211 or check your state's SNAP website — the income thresholds are higher than most people think.

Tactical: How to Rent with Bad Credit or No 3x Income

If your credit score is below 600 or you can't prove three times the rent in monthly income — the standard threshold most corporate landlords require — you're not locked out of housing. You just need a different approach.

Target private landlords. *Individual owners listing on Craigslist, Zillow, and Facebook Marketplace are far more flexible than corporate property management companies. A person renting out their second property can make a judgment*

call. A corporate algorithm can't. When you find a private listing, introduce yourself in person or by phone — not just through an online form. You're a human being looking for a home, not an application number.

Offer to pay two months upfront. *If you can scrape together first month's rent plus one extra month (instead of just the security deposit), many landlords will overlook the credit check. Cash in hand answers a lot of questions that a credit report raises.*

Bring your documentation before they ask. *Show up with three months of pay stubs, bank statements showing consistent deposits, an employment verification letter, and a reference from a previous landlord. The goal is to overwhelm the objection before it forms. You're not hiding from your financial situation — you're showing that despite the number on the report, you pay your bills.*

Use rent-reporting services. *Services like RentTrack and Boom report your on-time rent payments to the credit bureaus. Most landlords don't report rent payments, which means the biggest recurring bill you pay does nothing for your credit score. These services fix that. At $5-$10/month, they turn payments you're already making into credit-building activity.*

Consider room rentals and house-shares. *Renting a room in someone's house has much lower barriers than signing a solo lease. No credit check in most cases. Smaller deposits. And the rent is typically 40-60% of what a full apartment would cost, which frees up cash for everything else in this chapter.*

If you're denied, ask what would change the decision. *Sometimes it's a larger deposit. Sometimes it's a co-signer. Sometimes it's proof of income from a source they hadn't considered (like gig work earnings or benefits). The denial isn't always final — it's often the opening of a negotiation that the landlord expects you to walk away from. Don't walk away. Ask the question.*

The Close

Here's the thing about the Perkins framework that actually holds up, even down here in the broke trenches: he's right that money is life

energy. He's right that how you spend your resources is, in a real sense, how you spend your life. He just starts the story in the middle. He starts at the point where you have resources to allocate, where the question is how to optimize rather than how to survive.

This chapter — this book — starts at the beginning. At the part where you're sitting in your car with a flat tire and $34 in your account, doing math that no amount of optimization can fix, because you can't optimize your way out of not having enough. What you *can* do is plug the leaks. Stop the bleeding. Build the thinnest possible cushion between you and the next emergency. Five hundred dollars. A checking account that doesn't charge you to exist. A due date that matches your payday. Small, unglamorous, tedious moves that nobody's going to write an inspiring Instagram post about. We've started that work here — Chapter 2 is going to give you permission to spend a little on being human, and then Chapter 3 picks up the rest: breaking the expensive cycles that drain you and claiming the thousands in benefits you might be leaving on the table.

Perkins says the goal is to die with zero — to spend your last dollar on your last day, having wrung every drop of experience from your finite time on earth. That's a nice goal. I'd like to get there someday. But first, I'd like to live with more than zero. I'd like to get to the point where my life energy is actually mine to spend, instead of being siphoned off by a system that charges me a fee for not having enough to cover the fee.

That's what we're building toward. Not optimization. Not yet. First: survival. Then stability. Then — eventually, improbably, stubbornly — something that looks like a life you actually chose.

The flat tire is fixed now, by the way. It only cost me $221 and a small piece of my soul. Next time, it'll cost $87, because I'll have the $87. That's not a miracle. That's not a mindset shift. That's a checking account and $500 in savings, doing the only thing they were ever supposed to do: keeping a Tuesday from turning into a catastrophe.

Chapter 2: "Invest in Experiences" → Your Experiences Are Called Surviving

"In the end, the business of life is the acquisition of memories. In the end, that's all there is." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
"I have plenty of memories. I remember every single time my card got declined." — *Posted on r/povertyfinance, 2,400 upvotes*

The Hook

Here's a memory dividend for you.

It's a Thursday in March. Your kid wakes up at 2 a.m. with an ear infection — the screaming kind, the kind where you can see the pain in their face and you'd do anything to fix it. You know what it is because this is the third one in five months. You also know the urgent care copay is $75, and you have $41 in your account. The ER is technically free until the bill arrives, but the last ER bill — $1,340 for what turned out to be strep throat — is still in collections, and you can't do that again. So you call the nurse hotline. You wait on hold for twenty-two minutes while your kid cries into your shoulder. The nurse says: warm compress, children's ibuprofen, see a doctor in the morning. You don't have children's ibuprofen. The pharmacy is closed. The gas station three blocks away sells the off-brand for $8.99, which means your checking account will have $32 until Friday, which means you're doing the math again — the math you're always doing, the silent arithmetic of not having enough — while your three-year-old whimpers against your chest.

You will remember that night for the rest of your life. The weight of your kid. The hold music. The walk to the gas station in the dark. This memory will return to you at random moments — in the shower, in line at the grocery store, at 2 a.m. when your brain decides it's time for a highlight reel of your worst moments.

Congratulations. You have earned a memory dividend. It will compound for decades.

The Inversion

Bill Perkins wants you to invest in experiences. Not things — *experiences*. Sunsets in Portugal. Scuba diving in Belize. That cooking class in Tuscany where you learned to make pasta from a woman named Giovanna who told you the secret was "love and patience" and you thought, *Wow, I'm really living.*

The thesis is sound, actually. Research backs it up. Dr. Thomas Gilovich at Cornell has spent years demonstrating that experiential purchases produce more lasting happiness than material ones. People adapt to things — the new car becomes just your car, the new couch becomes just where you sit — but experiences become stories, become identities, become the connective tissue of a well-lived life. Memory dividends. You invest in the experience now and collect the emotional returns forever.

Beautiful idea. Genuinely. No sarcasm. The research is solid and the principle is real.

Here's the thing, though: Perkins is talking about *chosen* experiences. Voluntary ones. Experiences you opted into because you had the resources, the time, and the stability to say, "You know what would be fun? Skydiving." The entire framework assumes that your baseline is comfortable enough that you need to *add* experiences to feel alive.

When you're broke, you don't need to add experiences. The experiences find you. They kick down your door at 3 a.m. wearing the face of a medical bill or a landlord's notice or that sound your car just made. You are positively *drowning* in experiences. You have enough experiences to fill a goddamn memoir. None of them involve Tuscany.

Let me tell you about memory dividends from the other side of the income spectrum:

The time you chose which bill to send to collections. Not "chose" the way you choose a restaurant — chose the way a chess player sacrifices a piece. Okay, if I let the electric bill go thirty days past due, that's a $25 late fee but no shutoff for sixty days in my state. If I let the car insurance lapse, that's a misdemeanor if I get pulled over. If I skip the credit card minimum, that's a hit on my credit score, which raises my car insurance rate, which — right. There's no good move. There's just the least catastrophic move. You spend forty-five minutes on this. The experience is riveting. You will remember it. You will remember all of them, because there are so many, one after another, month after month, a carousel of shitty decisions that aren't really decisions because every option is bad.

The time your kid asked to do something and you had to say no. Not "We'll do it next weekend, sweetie." No. Just no. Because the something costs $15 and you don't have $15 and you won't have $15 and the look on your kid's face is a memory dividend that will pay out in guilt and self-loathing for the next twenty years, compound interest included.

And then there's the quiet version — the one that isn't dramatic poverty at all. You walk past the break room because someone is talking about their vacation. This one's subtle. It's not dramatic poverty. It's the quiet kind — the kind where you become fluent in the art of changing the subject, of laughing at stories about trips you'll never take, of performing the role of someone who simply "isn't into travel" because that's easier than saying you've never been on a plane. You develop a whole taxonomy of deflections. "I'm more of a homebody." "I'm saving up." "I just like my own bed." And the performance becomes so practiced that it starts to feel like personality — until someone asks you directly, "Where did you go on vacation?" and the silence before your answer is a half-second too long, and in that half-second lives the entire distance between their life and yours.

These are experiences. They are vivid. They are formative. They are seared into your brain with the intensity of a branding iron because your stress hormones were firing on all cylinders when they happened. You know what creates lasting memories even more effectively than joy? *Cortisol.* Your body is extremely good at remembering threats. Survival experiences don't just create memories —

they create *trauma responses dressed up as memories*, and they pay dividends you never asked for.

Perkins is right that experiences matter more than things. Where his framework breaks is the assumption that the word "experience" means something positive — or at the very least, voluntary. When you reframe "invest in experiences" from the bottom of the income ladder, the question isn't how to *add* experiences. It's how to make the experiences you're already drowning in slightly less terrible. And then — and this is the part that matters — how to carve out enough space to have an experience that isn't just another chapter in the ongoing saga of keeping the lights on.

The Reality

Frugal vs. Broke: A Distinction the Internet Refuses to Make

The lifestyle influencer ecosystem has built an entire aesthetic around frugality. A woman in a $400,000 house filming "budget meals" with a $300 stand mixer. A man who "retired at 35" because he "chose to live below his means" — means that included a $180,000 salary and a paid-off condo his parents helped him buy.

Frugal is a choice. Broke is a condition.

Frugal is choosing the smaller apartment to save for a down payment. Broke is choosing the smaller apartment because it's the only one that approved your 580 credit score, and it's still 55% of your take-home pay.

This distinction matters because it determines what kind of advice is useful. Frugal people need optimization tips. Broke people need *structural solutions* — how to change the equation so the math works at all. Telling a broke person to "invest in experiences" is like telling someone treading water in the open ocean to work on their butterfly stroke. The butterfly stroke is great. It's just not the current problem.

The Mental Health Cost of Zero Margin

Here's what happens to your brain when there is no breathing room.

The bandwidth tax from Chapter 1 — the 13-IQ-point cognitive deficit — shows up here too: chronic stress steals the quality of the time you have left, degrading the exact decision-making machinery you need to break the cycle.

And the experiences you're collecting in this state — the survival memories, the crisis memories, the lying-awake-at-3-a.m. memories — aren't just neutral recordings. They're actively training your nervous system to stay in threat mode. Dr. Nadine Burke Harris demonstrated that prolonged exposure to toxic stress reshapes the brain's stress response — the parts that handle fear get bigger, the parts that handle planning get smaller. Your brain is adapting to an environment that's telling it: *There is no safety. Stay alert. Do not plan for the future. Survive now.*

This is the real cost of zero margin. It's not just that you can't afford the trip to Portugal. It's that the chronic stress of not being able to afford *anything* is degrading the cognitive and emotional infrastructure you'd need to ever get there. The poverty of experiences isn't separate from the poverty of money. They're the same system, reinforcing each other in a loop that's extremely difficult to break from the inside.

Why "Self-Care" Advice Assumes a Different Tax Bracket

Quick detour into something that will make you want to throw your phone, but needs to be said.

The self-care industrial complex has taken a real psychological insight — that stress management is essential for health and functioning — and turned it into a consumer product category. "Take a bath." "Light a candle." "Treat yourself to a spa day." "Practice mindfulness with our $12.99/month app."

The research underlying self-care is legitimate. Taking breaks reduces cortisol. Pleasurable activities counterbalance the neurological effects of chronic stress. Small positive experiences genuinely do improve decision-making, emotional regulation, and physical health outcomes. A 2018 study in *Psychoneuroendocrinology* found that even brief positive experiences — fifteen minutes in nature, a pleasant conversation, a meal enjoyed without time pressure — measurably reduced cortisol levels and improved cognitive flexibility for hours afterward.

The problem is that self-care advice almost universally assumes you have three things: **time**, **money**, and **space**. The bath requires a bathtub (not a given if you're in a studio with a stand-up shower). The candle costs $8 at Target and you're not buying a candle when you need gas. The spa day — listen, the spa day isn't happening. The mindfulness app is competing with the $12.99 you need for your kid's school lunch account. And the advice to "take a mental health day" assumes you have paid time off, which 33 million American workers — almost a quarter of the civilian workforce — do not.

Self-care is not a consumer category. It's a human need. And when the dominant cultural framing of that need requires purchasing power, it effectively tells people without purchasing power that they don't deserve to take care of themselves. That their mental health is a premium feature, not a baseline right.

We're going to fix that. Not by pretending poverty isn't stressful — it is, profoundly so — but by building a framework for creating breathing room that doesn't require a Target run.

And this brings us back to experiences — the actual point of this chapter. Because if the self-care industry has the diagnosis right (you need moments that aren't survival) but the prescription wrong (buy our candle), then the real question is: how do you build memory dividends on a budget that barely covers rent? Turns out, the answer has less to do with what you spend and more to do with what you *notice*.

The Playbook

Here's where we get practical. The goal of this section is not to tell you to "enjoy the simple things" — that's the financial advice equivalent of telling a hungry person to appreciate the aesthetic of an empty plate. The goal is to identify specific, concrete ways to create moments that are not survival. Moments where your nervous system gets to stand down. Moments that create the *other* kind of memory dividend — the kind you actually want.

Everything in this playbook has been tested against a single constraint: **does this work if you have almost no money and almost no free time?** If the answer is no, it's not here.

Strategy 1: The $20 Fun Fund (The Most Important $20 You'll Ever Spend)

I know. You don't have $20. Hear me out.

Research on "mental accounting" — originally by Nobel laureate Richard Thaler — shows that money psychologically earmarked for a specific purpose is spent more deliberately and generates more satisfaction. A $20 bill labeled "fun money" feels different from the same $20 floating in your checking account.

The play: find $20 a month — big "if," but stay with me — and set it aside in an envelope, a jar, a separate account. Label it. This is not bill money. Not emergency money. This is *you* money, whose sole purpose is funding an experience that has nothing to do with keeping the lights on.

Why it matters: when every dollar goes to survival, your brain stops distinguishing between "working to live" and "living." The $20 fun fund breaks that merger. It represents *you as a person with desires*, not just a bill-paying machine.

Where to find the $20: - The EITC refund, divided by 12. If you qualify, the average refund is around $2,500. That's $208/month. Take $20 for this. (We'll talk EITC optimization in a later chapter.) - Rounding down your bank balance. Every time you check, round to the nearest $10 and move the difference. $47.32 becomes $40, and $7.32 goes to the jar. - Selling one thing per month. Not a lifestyle project — one item you don't need. Facebook Marketplace, OfferUp. The bar is low: one item, $10-$30. - One micro-gig per month. Not a side hustle (Chapter 4 covers why hustle culture is often counterproductive). One small thing: a TaskRabbit job, yard work for a neighbor, selling plasma. The point is to fund the fun fund with money that has no other claim on it.

The $20 is not financial advice. It's psychological infrastructure.

Strategy 2: The Free Tier (Experiences That Cost Nothing and Don't Suck)

Here's where most financial advice for poor people goes to die. "Go for a walk!" "Read a book!" "Enjoy a sunset!" I've been staring at a sunset every evening from the porch of my apartment that I can barely afford. It's very pretty. The rent is the same.

The problem isn't that free activities don't exist. The problem is the framing — the implication that you should be *grateful* for free things, as if gratitude is a substitute for resources. Skip the gratitude lecture. Here's what's actually worth your time.

The Public Library. Not a cliche — the most underutilized resource in America for people who are broke. The modern library is free Wi-Fi, free computer access, free printing (many branches), free streaming (Libby, Hoopla, Kanopy), free museum passes, free tax prep, free job search help, free children's programs, and in some systems, free tool lending and notary services. Get a card. Five minutes. Free.

High-value library hacks: - **Museum passes.** Many systems partner with local museums, zoos, and gardens for free or discounted passes. First-come-first-served. A family trip that would cost $60-$80 can cost zero. - **Digital streaming.** Kanopy's film catalog puts most paid services to shame. Libby has audiobooks and ebooks. Cancel at least one streaming subscription and replace it with library access. - **Skill-building.** Free access to LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, and language apps — the same courses that cost $30-$50/month retail.

Parks and trails. City and county parks are free. A 2019 study in *Scientific Reports* found that 120 minutes per week in natural environments significantly improved health and well-being, regardless of income. That's 17 minutes a day. A walk in a park gets you there.

Community events. Most communities have a rolling calendar of free events that nobody seems to know about. Farmers' markets (vendors near closing often discount or give away produce). Library talks. Summer concert series. Free outdoor movie nights. Church festivals (you don't need to be a member or religious). Check your city's events calendar — it's usually better than you'd expect.

Cooking as experience, not chore. There's a difference between cooking because you can't afford to eat out and cooking because you're trying a new recipe to see if you can pull it off. The ingredients might be the same. The difference is the *framing* — which, as the mental accounting research shows, actually changes the neurological experience. One new recipe a week. Ethnic grocery stores have spices at a fraction of mainstream prices, and the internet has eleven billion free recipes organized by budget.

The "free day" calendar. Google "[your city] free admission days" once and you'll have a year's worth. Bank of America's Muse-

ums on Us program covers hundreds of museums the first weekend of every month. National Park Service offers several fee-free days per year. Many children's museums have sponsored free evenings. These exist so that culture isn't rich-people-only. Use them without apology.

Strategy 3: Micro-Rituals (The Architecture of a Life That Isn't Just Surviving)

This one is about structure, not spending.

Psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky's research on "hedonic adaptation" shows we get used to everything, good and bad. But *varied, small, positive experiences* resist adaptation better than large, one-time events. Your brain adapts to the big stuff faster than a rotating set of small pleasures. A daily ritual you enjoy — even a tiny one — can generate more cumulative well-being than an annual vacation. Three hundred sixty-five small moments of "this is mine" will outperform one week of "this is amazing" followed by fifty-one weeks of gray.

A micro-ritual: a recurring, small, intentional act that exists solely for your well-being. Not productivity. Not self-improvement. *Well-being.*

Examples: - **Morning coffee, done deliberately.** Not gulped in the car. Made the way you like it, consumed in five minutes of quiet before the day starts. Costs five minutes and the coffee you were already going to drink. - **The weekly solo walk.** Headphones in, listening to something you chose — podcast, album, silence. The sole purpose is that you are a person walking on the earth, not a machine processing obligations. Thirty minutes. Free. - **The one-show ritual.** One show, one episode a week, not binge-watched, not background noise. Watched the way people used to watch TV — as an event. Make popcorn. Popcorn costs less than a dollar. This is your show night. - **Friday dollar store flowers.** Some Dollar Trees have fresh flowers for $1.25. A bouquet of slightly sad carnations on your kitchen table is a $1.25 declaration that your home is a place where you live, not just where you sleep between shifts. - **The Sunday reset.** One small thing that makes Monday less of an ambush. Lay out clothes. Make a lunch. Five minutes of preparation that tells your Monday-morning brain: someone was looking out for you. That someone was you.

These are not cute. They're strategic. Each one creates a neurological bookmark — a moment when your brain registers: *This is not survival. This is something else.* Over time, those bookmarks accumulate.

Strategy 4: The Breathing Room Budget

The practical framework for carving out space when there is no space.

Step one: Identify your survival floor. The absolute minimum to keep the roof up, lights on, and food in the house. For most people below the poverty line, this consumes 90-100% of take-home. If it's over 100%, no budgeting trick fixes that — you need higher income or lower expenses, and we'll address both in later chapters.

Step two: Find the margin. The gap between survival floor and take-home. Sometimes there's a sliver hidden in expenses that feel fixed but have flex: a forgotten subscription ($7/month), a bank fee eliminated by switching accounts ($12/month), food spending shifted by one meal-prep session a week ($20-$40/month). Think of it as excavation — looking for buried margin the way an archaeologist looks for artifacts.

Step three: Split the margin. Half goes to the emergency fund (Chapter 1). The other half — and every financial advisor will call this irresponsible — goes to living. The fun fund. The micro-rituals. One experience per month that isn't triage. This is *strategic*: positive emotional experiences improve executive function, reduce impulsive spending, and restore the cognitive bandwidth that scarcity depletes. Spending $10 on something that makes you feel human is an investment in the decision-making machinery that keeps the rest of your financial life functional.

Step four: Protect the margin. Bills expand to fill available money the way gas fills a container. Decide in advance that some portion of any windfall is protected. Not all of it — the emergency fund and urgent bills come first. But some. Even 10% of a windfall earmarked for "not survival" changes the psychology from "I got $200 and it's already gone" to "I got $200 and $20 of it was mine."

Strategy 5: Experience Stacking (Getting More From What You're Already Doing)

You don't need new activities. You can turn existing obligations into something that doesn't feel like obligation.

Errands + Audiobook/Podcast. You're already in the car or on the bus. Add headphones and something you care about, and the subjective experience shifts from "I'm doing a chore" to "I'm listening to this great podcast and I happen to be at the grocery store." Libraries have free audiobooks through Libby. Podcasts are free. This costs nothing and changes the texture of hours you were already spending.

Cooking + Social. Already cooking? Invite someone over. Not a dinner party — just: "I'm making spaghetti, come eat with me." A $4 meal shared with a friend is community. It's the thing the loneliness research says actually matters — human connection, shared presence, breaking bread. It doesn't need to be Instagram-worthy. It needs to be real.

Walks + Exploration. Walk somewhere you haven't been. A different neighborhood, a different park, a different route to the same place. Novelty — even small novelty — triggers dopamine release. New doesn't have to cost anything. It just has to be *different*.

Waiting rooms + Learning. You will spend a staggering amount of your life in waiting rooms. This time feels wasted because it's compulsory, but it's also unstructured. Download Duolingo. Read a library ebook on your phone. Start a free course on Khan Academy. The waiting room doesn't change, but what you do in it can.

Strategy 6: The Saturday Morning Fridge List

It's Saturday morning. Your kid is staring at you. No plans, no money. The default is screens for both of you, and by 2 p.m. guilt sets in.

The fix isn't inspiration — it's preparation. Spend thirty minutes, once, making a list of every free or near-free activity within reasonable distance. Tape it to the fridge. Saturday morning, you don't need bandwidth or creativity. You just pick one.

Here's what actually goes on the list: Library programs (story times, maker spaces, museum passes). Free admission days

(Google "[your city] free admission days" once for a year's worth). Parks you haven't tried — specific ones, not "go to the park." Your community events calendar (city website, check monthly). Free fitness (park equipment, YouTube, community center free hours). And a "$5 or less" section: dollar store craft supplies, popcorn and a library streaming movie, $1.25 carnations and a vase-painting session. None of it is glamorous. All of it beats staring at the ceiling.

The list works because it kills decision fatigue. "Think of something fun" is a cognitive task your exhausted brain can't prioritize. "Pick from the list on the fridge" is just pointing at a piece of paper.

The Math on Breathing Room

Let's put numbers on this, because numbers make it real. And let's build a baseline we'll return to throughout this book.

A person working full-time at $12/hour grosses $24,960/year. After payroll taxes (roughly 7.65% for FICA), that's about $23,050 take-home. Divided by 12, that's $1,920/month.

Average expenses for a single adult in a mid-cost area (not New York, not rural Mississippi — somewhere in the middle): - Rent: $950 (conservative for a one-bedroom or studio) - Utilities: $120 - Car payment/insurance/gas: $350 (if you have a car; less if you take transit, but transit costs time) - Food: $250 (USDA "thrifty" plan for one adult) - Phone: $50 (prepaid plan) - Minimum debt payments: $100 (if you have any debt, which statistically, you do) - Miscellaneous (toiletries, household, clothing): $50

Total: $1,870.

That leaves $50 a month. Fifty dollars between you and the feeling that you're just a survival machine. Fifty dollars to cover everything that isn't a fixed bill — every unexpected cost, every coffee, every birthday present, every moment of being human.

If you take $25 of that $50 and put it in an emergency fund and $20 in a fun fund, you have $5/month of actual margin. Five dollars. That's the math.

And yet — that $20 fun fund? That $20 is the difference between a month that's entirely gray and a month that contains one evening

at a free museum, or one batch of cookies baked with your kid, or one afternoon in a park with a library book and no agenda. It's not enough. Of course it's not enough. But "not enough" and "nothing" are different countries, and the border between them is $20.

The research supports this, almost annoyingly so. A 2010 study by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton — the famous Princeton study on income and happiness — found that emotional well-being rises with income but plateaus at about $75,000/year (around $95,000 adjusted for inflation). Below that threshold, every additional dollar buys measurable happiness. And the steepest part of the curve — where additional money has the *largest* marginal impact on well-being — is at the very bottom. The first $20 of "fun money" isn't just symbolically important. It's where the return on investment, measured in actual human happiness, is highest.

Bill Perkins has this right, even if he doesn't know it. Experiences *are* the point. Memory dividends *are* real. The mistake isn't in the principle — it's in the assumption that the principle only activates at a certain dollar amount. It activates at any dollar amount. It activates at $20. It activates at $1.25 spent on grocery store carnations. It activates at zero, if the experience is a walk in a park or a meal shared with someone you care about.

The catch is that activating it at zero requires something that costs more than money: it requires the psychological space to notice that you're alive, and not just surviving. And that space is exactly what chronic financial stress destroys.

Which is why building it back — deliberately, strategically, even when it feels irresponsible — is not a luxury. It's infrastructure.

The Close

So here's what memory dividends actually look like when you didn't start with a trust fund:

You've got the survival memories. Those aren't going anywhere. The car on the highway, the bill triage at midnight, the walk past the break room — they're in the vault, earning their terrible compound interest, and no amount of positive thinking will erase them. They're part of you. They made you resourceful and resilient and very, very tired.

But alongside them — next to them, not replacing them — you can start depositing something else. Small things. A Sunday morning where you sat with your coffee and nobody needed anything from you for five minutes. An afternoon at the free museum with your kid who touched every single exhibit with sticky hands and you didn't care because it was free and it was Tuesday and for once, just once, you were doing something that wasn't keeping the lights on. A $4 spaghetti dinner with a friend where you laughed about something stupid and the evening felt, briefly, like the kind of life they show in commercials.

Those memories compound too. Slower than the bad ones, quieter, easier to miss. But they compound.

Bill Perkins says you should die with zero. You're way ahead of him on that one. The real project — the one he never had to think about — is making sure that when you look back, zero isn't the only thing you see.

Next chapter: "Die With Zero" → Live With Zero (You're Already Doing It) — on saving when there's nothing to save, and the single most important financial milestone you've never heard a billionaire talk about.

Chapter 3: "Die With Zero" → Live With Zero (You're Already Doing It)

"The whole idea of Die With Zero is that you should be using up all your life energy before you die. Don't leave money on the table." – *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
"Sir, there is no table." – *Everyone making under $30,000*

The Hook

There's a particular kind of silence that happens at 11:47 p.m. on a Wednesday when you open your banking app and see $14.23. Not because something went wrong. Because nothing went wrong — this is just what Wednesday looks like. Rent cleared. Electric cleared. The auto-pay for your phone went through a day early, which is a fun surprise that cost you the difference between eating lunch at work tomorrow and pretending you're doing intermittent fasting. Thirteen days until payday. Fourteen twenty-three.

And somewhere, on a podcast recorded in a home office that costs more than your annual salary, a man who made his fortune trading energy futures is telling you that your problem is *you're saving too much.* That you need to learn to *spend it all before you die.* That the real tragedy is leaving money behind.

You look at the $14.23. You consider the tragedy of it.

You close the app.

The Inversion

Perkins' argument: most people oversave, defer joy, and die with piles of unspent cash. The solution is to spend down your net worth on experiences before you go. Die with your accounts near zero. It's compelling advice if your problem is too much money and not enough fun.

But here's the inversion:

You cannot oversave when you cannot save.

That's it. That's the entire rebuttal. Perkins built a sophisticated philosophical framework around the problem of surplus, and approximately 100 million Americans are staring at that framework the way a man dying of thirst stares at a wine-tasting guide. *Oh, you're worried about which vintages pair best with which decade of your life? Cool. I'm trying to find water.*

The "Die With Zero" philosophy assumes several things that are invisible to anyone who has them and blindingly obvious to anyone who doesn't:

1. **That you have savings to spend down.** The median savings account balance for households earning under $25,000 is approximately $1,000. Not the mean — the median. Half have less than that. A significant chunk have literally zero. You can't "die with zero" when you're already *living* with zero. You've achieved the goal. Congratulations. Where's your book deal?
2. **That you can model your future expenses.** Perkins talks about using actuarial tables and financial planning tools to estimate how much you'll need. This assumes your expenses are predictable. Below a certain income, expenses aren't predictable — they're ambushes. You don't budget for a broken timing belt. You don't budget for your kid's ear infection when you've got a $4,000 deductible. You don't budget for your landlord raising the rent 15% because they can and because what are you going to do, move? Moving costs $3,000.
3. **That you have a lifetime to recover from bad investments.** Perkins' framework assumes decades of runway — time to ride out market dips, absorb losses, and let compound growth do its repair work. You might not have until next month. When one bad financial move can cascade into eviction,

the luxury of a long time horizon isn't a planning assumption. It's a fantasy.

The inversion of "Die With Zero" isn't "Live With Everything." Nobody's asking for everything. The inversion is simpler and more urgent: **Stop living with zero.** Get to $500. Then $1,000. Then enough that the next time something breaks — and something will break, because things break, that's the nature of things — you can absorb it without your entire life unraveling.

Perkins wants you to spend your way to a meaningful death. Fine. We need to save our way to a stable Tuesday.

Let's talk about how.

The Reality: Your Brain on Broke

Before we get to tactics, we need to talk about why saving money when you're poor isn't just hard. It's hard in a way that changes the hardware you're thinking with.

The bandwidth tax from Chapter 1 — your brain locked in triage mode, tunneling on this week's crisis at the expense of next month's plan — is the reason saving feels impossible at this income level.

The Exploitation Machine

The financial products marketed to poor people are specifically designed to exploit the cognitive effects of being poor. This is not a conspiracy theory. It is a business model. Payday lenders don't set up shop in wealthy neighborhoods because wealthy people's brains have the bandwidth to see the trap. They set up in poor neighborhoods because poverty has already done half the sales work for them.

Why Traditional Budgeting Doesn't Work Below $25K

Let's be specific about this, because "budgeting doesn't work" sounds like an excuse if you don't explain the mechanics.

Traditional budgeting — the kind you find in most personal finance books, apps, and Dave Ramsey seminars — works on an allocation model. You take your income, divide it into categories (50/30/20, zero-based budgeting, envelope method, whatever), and

then spend according to the plan. This model assumes a critical precondition: **there is enough income to allocate.**

Below roughly $25,000 in annual take-home pay, the allocation model breaks down. Not because you're bad at it. Because there's nothing to allocate. There's only triage.

Chapter 2 ran the numbers line by line: at $12/hour, you get roughly $50 of breathing room on a good month and zero on a bad one. Now someone tells you to "save 20% of your income." Twenty percent of $2,083 is $417 — pulled from $50 of slack. You don't need a financial advisor to tell you what's wrong with this picture. You need a magician.

This is why traditional budgeting at poverty-level income isn't budgeting. It's choosing which bills to pay late this month so you can pay the ones that were late last month. It's a rotating triage of obligations that are all urgent and none of which can be skipped without penalty. You're not allocating. You're triaging. And triage doesn't produce savings. Triage produces survival.

So what does?

The Playbook: Saving When the Math Doesn't Math

Okay. Enough diagnosis. You know the disease. Let's talk treatment.

Everything in this section is designed for one reality: **you have almost no discretionary income.** Maybe $50 a month of genuine slack. Maybe less. Maybe slack is dark matter — physicists assure you it exists, but you've never personally encountered it. These strategies are built for that.

Step 1: The Psychology of Thresholds (Why the First Dollar Is the Hardest — and Why It Changes Everything)

There's a psychological cliff between $0 in savings and $1 in savings that is steeper than any financial gap that comes after. The jump from $0 to $500 is harder — both practically and psychologically —

than the jump from $500 to $5,000. That sounds wrong. It is also completely, demonstrably true.

At zero, saving feels like a joke — setting aside money you need *right now* for a future your tunneling brain can't visualize.

But something happens after you cross a threshold, and the threshold is remarkably low. The Urban Institute found that families with even $250 in savings were less likely to be evicted or miss utility payments after a disruption. The reason isn't just that $250 covers things. It's that **the existence of savings changes how you make decisions.** With a buffer — even a tiny one — you can decline the payday loan, absorb the car repair without missing rent, think three weeks ahead instead of three days. The money is armor, and it works before you take a hit. Just knowing it's there shifts your cortisol levels and engages your prefrontal cortex. Mullainathan and Shafir call this "slack" — and the cruelest irony of poverty is that the people who need it most have the least of it.

So forget $10,000. Forget "six months of expenses." Your milestones are these:

$100: You can absorb a minor car repair, a copay, an unexpected bill. This is the "I won't bounce my checking account" milestone.

$250: The Urban Institute threshold. You are now measurably less likely to experience material hardship from a financial shock.

$500: You can handle most common emergencies — a car repair, an ER copay, a deposit on a new apartment. This is the "I have options" milestone, the same threshold we established in Chapter 1.

$1,000: The "I can breathe" milestone. It means you've built a *system* that works. The habits that got you from $0 to $1,000 are the same habits that will get you from $1,000 to $5,000. The slope gets gentler because your brain is no longer fighting you — it's helping you.

Beyond $1,000: New strategies open up — high-yield savings accounts, retirement contributions, actual investment. But that's future chapters.

The time between rungs will vary. At $10 a week, $100 takes ten weeks, $500 takes a year, $1,000 takes two. That feels slow. It is slow. But two years from now, you'll be two years older regardless. The question is whether future-you has a thousand dollars or a thousand wishes.

What follows are the specific mechanics of getting there — the *how* to go with Chapter 1's *why* — plus two more high-impact tactics

that belong here because they're about changing the structural math, not just diagnosing it.

Step 2: Know When NOT to Save

Chapter 1 made the case for $500 as your first target. Here's the exception:

If you are carrying payday loan debt at 400% APR, paying that off IS saving. Putting $20 into a savings account earning 4% APY while you owe $500 at 400% is like filling a thimble while your house is on fire. The math isn't close.

Priority order: (1) Minimum payments on everything — the penalties for defaulting make minimums look like pocket change. (2) Kill the highest-interest debt first — payday loans, title loans, credit cards above 25%. Stop the bleeding before you stockpile blood. (3) Then start the savings pipeline. Even $5 a paycheck. Eliminating a 400% debt is a 400% return on your money.

One exception to the exception: if you have zero savings and your debt payments are stable, building a tiny cushion ($200-$300) before aggressively paying down debt can make sense — because without any buffer, one surprise expense pushes you right back to the payday lender. This is a judgment call, not a formula. You know your life better than any book does.

Step 3: The Savings Mechanics (Anti-Budget + Micro-Savings)

Here's a word that should be retired from poverty-level financial advice: *budget.* You've tried budgets. They lasted two weeks — not because you're undisciplined, but because the budget didn't survive first contact with reality.

Instead: **the anti-budget.**

1. **Set up one automatic transfer.** The day after your paycheck hits, your bank moves a small, fixed amount to a separate savings account. How small? Start with what doesn't scare you. $20, $10, $5 — whatever it is. Five dollars every two weeks is $130 a year, which is $130 more than zero, which is a different universe from zero.

2. **Spend everything else guilt-free.** One decision instead of a hundred. No tracking, no agonizing — the cognitive load of budgeting against a scarcity-taxed brain is gone.
3. **Increase by $5 when you can.** Not on a schedule. When you notice you're making it to payday without crisis, bump it up. Slow. Incremental. Sustainable.

The anti-budget works because it exploits the same behavioral principle subscription services use against you — out of sight, out of mind. The money moves before you see it. David Bach called this "paying yourself first" and became a bestselling author. He just assumed the amount was supposed to be meaningful. It doesn't have to be. It has to be automatic.

Supplementary tools to accelerate the process:

Round-up apps (Chime, Qapital, etc.): Round purchases to the nearest dollar, save the difference. Trivial amounts — $30-$50/month — that your tunneling brain doesn't register as threatening. Over a year, $360-$600. Caveat: avoid apps that charge monthly fees. Acorns at $3/month on a $50 balance is a 6% fee. Use free versions or your bank's own round-up feature.

The two-envelope method: Bills envelope (spoken for, don't touch) and Everything Else envelope (your discretionary cash for the pay period). When Everything Else is empty, you're done until payday. No card to swipe, no overdraft to trigger. Anything left on payday? That's savings. Move it.

The flat-rate challenge: $5 a week, every week, for a year. That's $260. Combined with the anti-budget transfer, you're in striking distance of $500.

Step 4: Protect the Savings

This might be the most important step, and it's the one most advice skips.

Once you have savings — even a small amount — the world will try to take it. Not through theft (though that too). Through the entirely reasonable demands of daily life. The car will need tires. A bill will be higher than expected. Someone you love will need help. And your savings account will sit there, available, whispering, *I can fix this.*

Some guidelines for protecting what you've built:

Make the savings inconvenient to access. Don't keep it in your primary checking account. Put it in a separate savings account, ideally at a different bank or credit union. Remove the debit card if there is one. The goal is to add friction between impulse and withdrawal. Not impossible to access — this is an emergency fund, and emergencies happen. But hard enough that you have to *decide* to access it, not just *drift* into spending it.

Define "emergency" before the emergency happens. Right now, while you're calm, write down what counts as an emergency worth dipping into savings: car repair that prevents you from getting to work. Medical event. Housing emergency. Job loss. That's roughly the list. A sale at Target is not an emergency. Your friend's birthday is not an emergency (buy them a card and cook dinner; they'll understand). Being broke three days before payday is not an emergency — it's a budget gap, and you solve it by adjusting the anti-budget, not by raiding savings.

Forgive yourself when you have to use it. This is real. You will, at some point, need to pull from savings for a genuine emergency. That's literally what it's for. And when it happens, you might feel like you've failed. You haven't. The fund worked. It did its job. It prevented a $500 problem from becoming a $2,000 payday-loan problem. Refill it and move on. The system works even when you use it. *Especially* when you use it. That's the whole point.

Step 5: Break One Expensive Cycle

What it costs: Varies — could be $0, could be $50-$200 in upfront investment **What it gets you:** Long-term savings that compound over time **When it doesn't work:** When the upfront cost is genuinely out of reach (in which case, revisit after the emergency fund is built)

Pick one poverty-penalty cycle — just one — and break it.

- **The laundromat cycle:** If you're spending $20+/week at the laundromat, look for a used washer on Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist, or at a Habitat for Humanity ReStore. Working used washers go for $50-$150. If your housing has hookups, this pays for itself in weeks. If it doesn't, this tactic doesn't work — skip it, no guilt.
- **The check-cashing cycle:** Covered in Chapter 1. Get banked. Eliminate the fee.

- **The small-quantity cycle:** If there's a Costco, Sam's Club, or similar warehouse store near you, check whether a membership is worth it for the specific items you buy most. For some people (especially families), the per-unit savings on diapers, formula, paper goods, and staples pay for the membership in a month. For a single person buying mostly fresh food, it may not be worth it. Do the math on your actual purchases, not on some hypothetical bulk-buying fantasy. Also: some warehouse stores offer day passes, and you can shop at Costco without a membership if you use a Costco gift card (buy one from a friend or online).
- **The bad-credit cycle:** Get your free credit reports (AnnualCreditReport.com — the only legit free source, not any of the fifty scam sites with "free" in their names). Dispute any errors. If you have old debts in collections, know that they fall off your report after seven years and that paying them can sometimes *restart* the clock depending on the type of debt and your state's laws. This is a place where a free consultation with a nonprofit credit counseling agency (NFCC.org) is worth the time.
- **The payday loan cycle:** If you're currently in a payday loan cycle — and roughly 12 million Americans are, at APRs that average around 400%, because when the system fails you the vultures are ready — your first priority is getting out. Some states have extended payment plans that payday lenders are required to offer. Some credit unions offer Payday Alternative Loans (PALs) at radically lower rates. If your employer has an earned wage access program (apps like DailyPay or Payactiv, offered through some employers), that can replace the payday loan at zero or very low cost. The goal is to replace the 400% APR with anything — literally anything — that costs less.

Step 6: Claim Your Benefits (You're Leaving Thousands on the Table)

What it costs: 2-3 hours of applications, spread across a few sessions **What it gets you:** $3,000-$6,000+/year in benefits, food, healthcare, and tax credits **When it doesn't work:** When you're not eligible, or when programs are so backlogged that access is effectively theoretical

The average eligible low-income household leaves $3,000 to $6,000 per year in benefits unclaimed — not because they don't qualify, but because nobody told them, the application felt too daunting, or the system made them feel like begging. Block out two hours this week — one for research, one for applications. Here's what to hit, in priority order:

First call: 211. Dial it from any phone. Tell the person who answers your situation. They will tell you every local program you qualify for — food, rent, utilities, job training, childcare, transportation. This single call replaces hours of Googling. The people who answer 211 are navigators; their job is connecting you to money and services. Let them do their job.

Second: SNAP and Medicaid. Many states let you apply for both on a single application through your state's DHHS website. SNAP averages roughly $234/month per person. Medicaid eliminates the terror of a medical bill destroying your finances. If you have kids, add WIC (for children under 5) and free school meals while you're at it.

Third: LIHEAP. The Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program pays part of your heating and cooling bills. Apply before winter — funds are first-come, first-served in most states. This one actually works, the application is simpler than most, and it saves $200-$800/year depending on your state.

Fourth: File your taxes (even if you owe nothing). The Earned Income Tax Credit is worth up to $7,830 for a family with three kids (2025 tax year; amounts adjust annually for inflation). If you're single, the EITC is smaller but still worth filing for — up to $632 with no kids. On top of that, the Child Tax Credit is worth up to $2,000 per qualifying child — and a portion is refundable even if you owe no taxes. Between the EITC and the CTC, a working parent with two kids could see $5,000-$10,000 back. Millions of eligible people never claim these credits because they don't file. Use VITA (free in-person tax prep, available January-April) or IRS Free File online. This might be the single largest deposit you see all year.

Fifth: Community health centers. Federally qualified health centers provide care on a sliding fee scale. FindAHealthCenter.hrsa.gov. You pay what you can — sometimes nothing.

The full list of programs, with eligibility details and how to apply, is in Appendix B. None of these programs are fun to navigate. The forms are long, the wait times are brutal, and the experience

often feels designed to make you feel like you're begging. You're not begging. You're accessing services funded by your tax dollars (yes, even at $20,000 a year — sales tax, payroll tax, gas tax). Use them.

The Close

So here's where we are: Bill Perkins wrote a book telling wealthy people to stop hoarding money, and it was a bestseller. You're reading a chapter about how to save your first $500 using behavioral psychology tricks to outsmart a brain that poverty has put into permanent survival mode, and somehow *you're* the one who's supposed to feel like you're bad with money.

And let's be honest about something: **you should not have to be this strategic to survive.** The fact that saving $500 requires a chapter's worth of psychological workarounds and milestone systems is not a testament to the complexity of personal finance. It's an indictment of an economy that pays full-time workers poverty wages and then sells them books about how to be smarter with their poverty wages. Both things are true — the tactics in this chapter work, and the system that makes them necessary is broken. You can use the duct tape *and* understand that you shouldn't need to.

You're not bad with money. You're good with money. You're *incredible* with money. You do more with $2,083 a month than most financial advisors could manage, and you do it every month, with no margin for error, while your brain is running on 13 fewer IQ points than it would be if the rent were lower. You are running a triage unit with no staff, no supplies, and no shift change, and the people in the waiting room keep handing you articles about wellness.

Start the $5 transfer. Open the separate savings account. Build toward $100, then $250, then $500. And when you get to $1,000 — and you will — take a moment. Not to celebrate, though you should. But to notice that your brain feels different. That the tunnel is a little wider. That you can see a little further. That's not a motivational platitude. That's the bandwidth tax lifting, one dollar at a time.

Perkins says die with zero. You've been living with it. The goal now is to stop.

Five dollars at a time, if that's what it takes.

Next chapter: we talk about what happens when you try to "invest in experiences" and your primary experience is working.

Part II: The Game They Forgot to Tell You About

Chapter 4: "Your Money or Your Life" — Your Money AND Your Life (They Want Both)

"The most important currency in life isn't money — it's time." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero

"I'd love to have either one." — *A woman working two jobs who asked not to be named because her day shift doesn't know about her night shift*

The Alarm Goes Off at 4:45 AM

Here's how Marcus — a composite, but not fiction — spends a Wednesday.

The alarm goes off at 4:45 AM. Not because Marcus is an early riser, not because he's on that 5 AM CEO morning routine grindset, and not because he's optimizing his circadian rhythm for peak performance. The alarm goes off at 4:45 because the bus that gets him to the warehouse by 6:00 leaves at 5:22, and if he misses it, the next one gets him there at 6:40 — forty minutes late, which is a write-up, and three write-ups is termination. So the alarm goes off at 4:45.

He works the warehouse until 2:30, takes two buses to his second job at a restaurant supply store, works from 3:30 to 9:00, waits nineteen minutes for the bus home, gets to his apartment at 10:15, reheats something from a can, scrolls his phone for twenty minutes because his brain is too fried to sleep but too fried to do anything

useful, and falls asleep on the couch with the TV on because the silence feels worse than the noise. The alarm goes off at 4:45.

Between the two jobs, Marcus grosses about $3,100 a month. After taxes, FICA, and the $47/month his first job charges him for the privilege of a health insurance plan with a $6,000 deductible, he takes home about $2,480. His rent is $925. His car — wait, Marcus doesn't have a car. His *bus pass* is $85. His phone is $45. Groceries, if you can call them that, are about $200. Student loan payment on the associate's degree he didn't finish: $187. That leaves $1,038 for everything else — utilities, laundry, the occasional new pair of work boots when the old ones split, and the creeping awareness that he's thirty-one years old and this is his life.

Marcus works approximately sixty-three hours a week across both jobs. If you count the commute time — which you should, because he's sure as hell not doing it for fun — it's closer to seventy-two. He has no paid time off at either job. He hasn't been to a doctor since the urgent care visit two years ago that he's still paying off. He sleeps, on average, five and a half hours a night.

Bill Perkins would like Marcus to know that time is more valuable than money.

Marcus is aware.

The Inversion: Time vs. Money vs. Whatever's Left

Perkins' argument about time and money is, in isolation, hard to argue with. The basic idea: you can always make more money, but you can never make more time. Therefore, you should stop trading excessive amounts of time for money you don't need, and instead use your time — your finite, irreplaceable, ticking-away-right-now time — on experiences, relationships, and joy. Stop working so hard. Start living.

It's a beautiful sentiment. It's also a sentiment that assumes you have a choice.

The "time vs. money" framework imagines a dial you can turn. A little more time, a little less money. A little more money, a little less time. You calibrate. You optimize. You find your sweet spot.

But when you're poor, there is no dial. There's a lever, and it's stuck in one position: all the way over to "trade every waking hour for not quite enough money to survive." You didn't choose this position. You don't prefer it. But the lever requires a certain amount of force to move — savings, options, credentials, connections, a safety net — and you don't have any of those things because you've been too busy pushing the lever that won't move.

Perkins says the goal is to stop trading time for money you don't need. That's the luxury version of the problem. The poverty version is: you're trading time for money you desperately need, and there's still not enough of either one, and you're too exhausted from the trading to think clearly about anything else.

This is the time poverty trap, and it's not a metaphor. It's a machine.

The machine works like this: You don't earn enough at one job, so you get a second job. The second job takes up the time you might have used to get a certification, apply for better positions, comparison-shop for cheaper insurance, cook meals instead of buying fast food, or simply rest so your brain can function above survival mode. Because you can't do any of those things, your earning potential stays flat, your expenses stay high, and you continue to need the second job. The thing that's keeping you alive is also the thing that's keeping you trapped. It's a hamster wheel with a billing department.

And the real kicker? The exhaustion from all that work doesn't just steal your time. It steals the *quality* of the time you have left. You get home at 10:15 PM and you have, technically, a couple hours before you need to sleep. That's "free time." But you're not free in it. You're a husk. You're a person-shaped bag of cortisol and decision fatigue staring at a phone screen because your brain has been in go-mode for seventeen hours and it doesn't know how to stop. That's not time. That's recovery. And it's not enough recovery, which means tomorrow you'll be even more depleted, which means tomorrow's decisions will be even worse, which means — well, you get it. The wheel turns.

Perkins talks about "time buckets" — periods of your life when you should pursue certain experiences. When you're young and healthy, travel. When you're middle-aged and established, mentor and invest. When you're old and wise, reflect.

Here are Marcus's time buckets: *Before work. At work. Between work. At work again. After work (nonfunctional). Sleep (insufficient).*

That's not a life being lived. That's a life being spent. And not in the way Perkins means.

The Reality: Why Exhaustion Is the Most Expensive Thing You Own

Let's talk about what time poverty actually costs, because it's not just philosophical. It has a dollar value, and that dollar value is higher than most people realize.

The bandwidth tax is always running. Now layer sleep deprivation on top. The CDC reports that adults sleeping fewer than seven hours show measurably impaired decision-making. A 2022 *SLEEP* study found that sleep-restricted individuals made financial decisions 11% worse than well-rested counterparts. You're already at reduced cognitive capacity because you're poor, then further impaired because you're exhausted from working the hours necessary to be slightly less poor.

Decision fatigue has a dollar value:

Impulse spending. When you're exhausted, your prefrontal cortex goes on break. This is why you end up in the McDonald's drive-through at 9:45 PM spending $11 on food you don't want instead of eating the $2 worth of rice and beans at home. Not because you're bad at decisions — because you've made nine hundred decisions today and your brain is out of gas. Three times a week, that's $1,400 a year.

Inability to comparison shop. Comparison shopping is work. It requires time, energy, and the mental bandwidth to hold multiple options in your head and evaluate them. When you have none of those things, you pay whatever's in front of you. You don't call three insurance companies. You don't drive to three grocery stores. You don't compare the interest rates on two different financing options. You take whatever's available because you're too tired to look for anything better. Layer on the failure to comparison shop, missed deadlines, late fees, and the health costs of chronic sleep deprivation, and the total exhaustion tax runs $3,000 to $6,000 per year.

That's on top of the poverty penalty we talked about in Chapter 1. It's money you're losing not because you earned it and spent it badly, but because the system ground you down to the point where you can't make good decisions about it.

The cruelest part: the solution to exhaustion is rest, and rest requires either time or money, and you don't have either one because you're exhausted.

The Hustle Culture Lie

Let's talk about the second job, because this is where the American dream really shows its ass.

The cultural narrative says: work harder, get a side hustle, monetize your time. That narrative is, in many cases, a lie. Sometimes a second job genuinely helps. But often, especially for people already working full-time at low wages, the math doesn't work the way you think it does. Here's why.

The true cost of a second job is not zero. When you calculate the value of a second job, you can't just look at the hourly wage. You need to account for:

- **Transportation and incidentals.** Getting to and from a second job costs money (gas, bus fare, car wear) and time — plus different jobs often mean different clothes, different shoes, different tools. If your second job pays $12/hour and you spend 45 minutes each way getting there, you've already burned 1.5 hours of unpaid time per shift. On a five-hour shift, your effective hourly rate just dropped to $9.23 before we even get to the other costs.
- **Meals.** You're not going home between jobs to cook. You're buying something on the way. That's $7-12 per shift you wouldn't have spent otherwise.
- **Childcare.** If you have kids, a second job often means paying someone to watch them. Evening and weekend childcare is more expensive than standard daycare hours. If you're paying $10/hour for a sitter during a shift that pays $12/hour, you're working for $2/hour. Before taxes.
- **Benefits phase-outs.** Additional income can push you past eligibility thresholds for the Earned Income Tax Credit ($3,000-$7,000 for families), Medicaid, SNAP, or housing assistance. Losing $400/month in SNAP benefits because your second job

pushed your income $50 above the threshold is not a raise. It's a pay cut with extra steps.

- **Health costs.** Working sixty-plus hours a week with insufficient sleep degrades your health over months and years. The costs — medical bills and reduced future earning capacity — don't show up immediately, which is why they're easy to ignore and devastating when they arrive.

When you account for all of this, many second jobs pay an effective rate of $3-7/hour. Some pay negative. You can literally lose money by working more.

I'm going to say that again because it's important: **it is possible to lose money by working more.** If your second job costs more in transportation, childcare, lost benefits, and health degradation than it pays, you are paying for the privilege of being exhausted. Hustle culture doesn't mention this. Hustle culture doesn't do math.

The Algorithm Tax

And then there's the gig economy, which deserves its own special circle of financial hell.

The pitch is seductive: be your own boss, work when you want, earn on your schedule. Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, Instacart, Amazon Flex — the platforms market themselves as freedom. What they actually are is a second job with worse math, dressed up in an app with a friendly interface.

The rates tell the story. DoorDash base pay has fallen from $5-$7 per trip to as low as $2-$3. The platforms implement these cuts gradually — a few cents here, a restructured "earnings model" there — so the decline is invisible on any given day but devastating over a year. You're working the same hours for 40% less money than two years ago.

Then there's the acceptance rate game. Decline too many low-paying orders and the algorithm punishes you: fewer offers, worse offers, loss of "priority" status. You're technically an independent contractor who can decline any job. In practice, declining means the algorithm starves you out. Meanwhile, the apps hide tip opacity and manipulate base pay — when the customer tips more, the platform reduces its base pay, so the customer's generosity goes to DoorDash's bottom line, not yours.

The number that kills the whole pitch: **wait time and dead time.** The apps don't pay you while you sit in a Chipotle parking lot for twenty minutes, drive fifteen minutes back to the busy zone, or circle a block looking for parking. A 2023 Economic Policy Institute analysis found that after vehicle expenses, self-employment taxes, unpaid wait time, and dead miles, the median DoorDash driver earns approximately **$6.50 to $10.50 per hour** — including all the hours the app doesn't count.

Take Keisha, a single mom in Atlanta who picked up DoorDash shifts after her son's daycare hours. Four hours on the app, eight deliveries, the screen says $72. But subtract gas ($12), vehicle wear ($8-$10 for ~50 miles), self-employment taxes nobody withheld ($11), and the hour of dead time that stretched four hours into five. Real earnings: about $41-$43 for five hours — $8.20-$8.60/hour, before the oil change or the insurance premium increase from driving 25,000 extra miles a year. Keisha did the math after three months and went back to picking up overtime at her day job. The hourly rate was lower on paper. The actual rate was higher in every way that counts.

The gig economy isn't a hustle. It's an algorithm extracting maximum labor for minimum pay, with the innovation of making *you* responsible for every cost the platform would bear if you were an employee. Call it what it is: a second job where you also provide the office, the equipment, and the HR department, and your boss is a piece of software that gets meaner every quarter.

The Hidden Time Tax of Poverty

Beyond the formal working hours, poverty imposes a staggering amount of unpaid administrative labor. Things that cost money for wealthier people cost time for poorer people, and nobody counts that time.

Transportation. The average public transit commute in major metro areas is 48 minutes each way — roughly double the car commute. Marcus's seventy-two-hour week includes nine hours of commuting. That's an entire additional workday, every week, that he's not paid for.

Laundry. No in-unit laundry means the laundromat: 1.5-2 hours per run, plus transit time. A biweekly commitment of 3-4 hours that people with a washer and dryer have never once thought about.

Government offices and bureaucracy. Applying for benefits, renewing documents, dealing with the court system — all require showing up in person during business hours, which are also your working hours. The average SNAP application takes 5-8 hours across multiple visits. The administrative burden of being poor is a part-time job that doesn't pay.

Banking without a bank. If you're unbanked, cashing a check means a physical trip to a check-cashing store. Paying bills means money orders. Each transaction costs both money *and* time that people with bank accounts and auto-pay spend on literally anything else.

Add all of this up and you get what policy analysts at the Aspen Institute and others have called the "time tax" of poverty — an estimated 5-15 hours per week of unpaid labor spent simply navigating the logistics of being poor. That's not working. That's not resting. That's not building skills or applying for better jobs or spending time with your kids. It's just… overhead. The operating cost of a life the system wasn't designed to support.

Marcus works sixty-three paid hours a week. He commutes nine. He spends another four or five on laundry, errands, and the various administrative indignities of his situation. His actual "working week" is closer to seventy-seven hours. He's paid for sixty-three of them. The rest is donated to the system that's failing him.

The Playbook: Reclaiming Time You Didn't Know You Were Losing

Alright. Enough diagnosis. Let's talk about what you can actually do.

The strategies here fall into three categories: **calculate** (figure out what your time is actually worth), **cut** (stop trading time for less than it costs you), and **reclaim** (get back time the system is quietly stealing).

None of these require money you don't have. Some require a few hours of focused effort, which, yes, I realize is its own challenge when you're time-poor. Think of it as an investment — a few hours now to save dozens of hours per month going forward.

Strategy 1: Calculate Your True Hourly Wage

This takes thirty minutes, a pen, and basic math. If you're in such acute crisis that you can't pause for an hour, skip to Strategy 4 and come back when you can breathe. But if you can do this, do it first — it's the single most important number in your financial life.

Your paycheck says you make $14/hour. That's a lie. Not on purpose — it's just incomplete. Your *true* hourly wage accounts for all the time and money you spend in order to earn that $14.

Here's the formula:

True Hourly Wage = (Total Pay - Work-Related Costs) / (Total Hours Spent on Work)

Let's run it.

Say you work 40 hours a week at $14/hour. That's $560 gross per week. But now subtract:

- Commute time: 1 hour/day = 5 hours/week
- Getting-ready-for-work time: 30 min/day = 2.5 hours/week
- Decompression/recovery time after work (time you need before you can do anything useful): 30 min/day = 2.5 hours/week
- Commute costs: gas or bus fare, let's say $40/week
- Work meals (the lunch you buy because you didn't have time to pack one): $25/week
- Work clothes/shoes wear: ~$10/week amortized
- Other work costs (parking, tolls, uniform cleaning): $10/week

Adjusted pay: $560 - $85 = $475/week Adjusted hours: 40 + 5 + 2.5 + 2.5 = 50 hours/week

True hourly wage: $475 / 50 = $9.50/hour.

You thought you were making $14. You're making $9.50. And we haven't even factored in taxes yet. After payroll taxes, you're closer to $8.

Now run this calculation for your second job separately. I'll wait.

If your second job's true hourly wage comes out below $5 — which happens more often than you'd think once you factor in childcare, extra transportation, and the meals you're buying because you can't cook — you need to seriously evaluate whether that job is helping you or just exhausting you for pocket change.

This number is your weapon. Write it down. Put it on your fridge. Marcus, from the top of this chapter, grosses $3,100 across two jobs. Run his real numbers — the bus passes, the meals between shifts, the nine hours of weekly commuting — and his true hourly

wage on that second job is closer to $6. Every time someone tells you to "hustle harder," look at the number. If the hustle pays $4.75/hour after real costs, it's not a hustle. It's a donation of your health and sanity to someone else's business.

Strategy 2: The Rest Audit

Fifteen minutes of honest self-assessment. That's it. The goal is to stop treating sleep as optional and start treating it as what it is: a financial tool that pays better than most of your waking hours.

We've established that exhaustion costs money. The question is: how much is an additional hour of sleep worth to you in avoided bad decisions?

Let's be conservative. If decision fatigue costs you $3,000/year (the low end of our earlier estimate) and you're operating on 5.5 hours of sleep per night when you need 7, you're running a 1.5-hour daily sleep deficit. That's about 550 hours of lost sleep per year driving $3,000 in bad decisions.

That makes each hour of lost sleep worth roughly $5.45 in avoided financial damage.

Is that a lot? Not per hour, no. But you can't buy sleep one hour at a time. Sleep deprivation is cumulative. The damage compounds. The person running a chronic deficit isn't making one $5.45 mistake per missed hour — they're gradually degrading their entire decision-making apparatus until they make one $500 mistake that wipes out a month of side-hustle income.

So: conduct a rest audit. For one week, track:

1. What time you go to bed
2. What time you actually fall asleep
3. What time you wake up
4. How you feel when you wake up (1-5 scale, where 1 is "kill me" and 5 is "functional")
5. One financial or logistical decision you made that day that you suspect was affected by tiredness

At the end of the week, look at the pattern. Then ask yourself one question: **Is there one hour in my day that I'm currently spending on something worth less than what an hour of sleep would save me?**

Usually, the answer is yes. Usually, it's the hour between 10 PM and 11 PM that you're spending doomscrolling or watching some-

thing you won't remember tomorrow. That hour isn't rest. It's the *illusion* of rest — your brain pretending to relax while actually staying in a low-grade stress state. Real rest — eyes closed, phone down, lights off — is a different thing entirely, and it pays better.

I'm not telling you to go to bed earlier like your mother. I'm telling you that sleep is a financial instrument. Treat it like one. If someone offered you a savings account that returned $5.45/hour with compound benefits, you'd open it immediately. Your pillow is that savings account. It's just not marketed as well.

And to be clear: when I talk about strategic rest, I am not talking about self-care. I'm not going to tell you to take a bath or light a candle or practice mindfulness (though if those things work for you, go for it). The "self-care" narrative puts the responsibility on you to feel better about a situation that is structurally designed to grind you down. Strategic rest isn't about feeling better. It's about functioning better so that the limited decisions you get to make are good ones. It's not soft. It's not indulgent. It's the most coldly rational thing you can do.

Here's the cold version: you are a machine that runs on sleep and food. Yes, that's management's language — and it's worth using strategically, because every factory manager in America understands that poorly maintained equipment breaks down and costs more to repair than the maintenance would have cost. None of them seem to understand it about their workers. So understand it about yourself. Not because you owe yourself kindness (though you do). Because you can't afford the cost of running on empty, and nobody else is going to do the math for you.

Strategy 3: The "Hell Yes" Test for Extra Work

This one costs nothing — it's a decision framework for the next time someone offers you extra hours, overtime, or side work. If you're in genuine crisis and you need every dollar regardless of the cost, skip this — in crisis mode, you do what you have to do. But if you have even a sliver of choice, run the offer through three filters before you say yes.

Before you say yes to extra hours, overtime, a side gig, or a second job, run it through three filters:

Filter 1: The True Hourly Wage Test. Calculate the true hourly wage (Strategy 1) for the extra work. If it's below your pri-

mary job's true hourly wage, you're literally valuing your time *less* by doing more of it. The extra work needs to pay *more* per real hour than your primary job — or have a strategic benefit (networking, skill-building, a path to better work) that justifies the lower rate.

Filter 2: The Opportunity Cost Test. What would you do with that time if you didn't work? If the answer is "sleep," that has a calculable value (Strategy 2). If the answer is "apply for better jobs," that has a potentially enormous value. If the answer is "watch Netflix and eat chips," then sure, maybe the extra shift is a better use of time. Be honest. But remember: genuine rest is not the same as passive consumption. Rest has ROI. Netflix does not.

Filter 3: The Sustainability Test. Can you do this for three months without breaking? Not two weeks — three months. Because the health costs of unsustainable work don't show up for weeks or months. If the answer is no — if you can already feel the burnout accumulating, if you're getting sick more often, if you're snapping at people, if you're making mistakes at your primary job because you're too tired — then the extra work is borrowing against your future self, and future-you is going to be pissed about the interest rate.

If the extra work passes all three filters, say yes. If it fails any one of them, think hard. If it fails two or more, the answer is no unless you're in crisis. And if you're in crisis, set a hard deadline — "I'll do this for six weeks, then reassess" — because "temporary" extra work has a way of becoming permanent if you don't explicitly decide when it stops.

Strategy 4: Batch, Eliminate, Automate

Two to three hours of planning upfront can reclaim three to seven hours every week from the administrative overhead of being broke. If you're unbanked, some of the automation pieces won't apply yet — adapt what you can, skip what you can't.

The time tax of poverty is real, but it's not entirely fixed. Some of it can be reduced. Remember Marcus's seventy-seven-hour actual week — sixty-three paid, the rest donated to commuting, laundry, and administrative overhead. Even shaving five hours off that unpaid total changes what's possible.

Batch errands ruthlessly. Stop making five separate trips when one planned trip would cover it. Pick one day per week — ideally one of your days off — and batch every errand into a single

route. Laundromat, grocery store, pharmacy, post office, bill payment — all in one loop. Use your phone's map to plan the most efficient route. This sounds basic, and it is. But the difference between five scattered trips and one batched trip can be 3-4 hours per week, and those hours are yours.

Eliminate what you can. Go through your recurring time commitments and ask: does this actually need to happen? Some examples: Can you switch to a closer grocery store even if it's slightly pricier? (The $8 savings isn't worth 40 extra minutes and $4 in gas.) Can you negotiate a shift that cuts your commute? Can you pay online the bill you're currently paying in person? Each of these decisions is worth 30 to 60 minutes of your life.

Automate what you can't eliminate. If you have a bank account — even a basic free checking account from a credit union — set up automatic bill pay for your fixed expenses. Rent, utilities, phone. Not because you have money sitting in the account waiting, but because auto-pay eliminates the cognitive load of remembering due dates and the late fees that come from forgetting. If you're worried about overdrafts, many banks and credit unions now offer low-balance alerts. Set one for $50 above your auto-pay total. That gives you a warning before the payment goes through.

If you don't have a bank account, getting one is a high-leverage use of time. A basic checking account at a credit union — many have no minimum balance and no monthly fees — eliminates check-cashing fees ($900-$1,500/year, as we covered in Chapter 1) and enables automation that saves you hours per month. If you've been denied a bank account due to ChexSystems (the banking industry's blacklist for people who've had accounts closed), look into "second chance" checking accounts. Many credit unions offer them specifically for people in this situation.

Use the library for all of it. This deserves its own line because it's that good. Your public library offers free internet, free printing, free workspace, and — in many systems — free job search assistance, access to LinkedIn Learning or Coursera, notary services, social workers who help navigate benefit applications, and meeting rooms for phone interviews. A library card is free. The American public library system is, per dollar of public investment, the most effective anti-poverty infrastructure in the country. It exists specifically so that access to information and resources isn't gated by in-

come. Batch your administrative work there and knock out three things at once.

Strategy 5: The Strategic No

This one costs discomfort, maybe a difficult conversation. What it buys you is the most undervalued resource in poverty: margin. If you have zero negotiating power and "no" means "fired," this strategy waits until you have slightly more ground to stand on.

This is the hardest strategy in this chapter, because it requires doing something that poverty conditions you never to do: turning down money.

But here's the scenario. Your manager offers an extra Saturday shift. Your gut says yes — it always says yes. But you've done the math (Strategy 1) and the Saturday shift pays $5.50/hour true. You've slept under six hours every night this week. Your eye is twitching.

The strategic no means saying: "I can't this Saturday, but I'm available next week." Or: "I can do a half shift." Or even just: "Not this time."

You're not being lazy. You're being strategic. You're recognizing that the $44 you'd earn in true wages is less than the cost of the bad decisions you'll make next week because you didn't rest. You're recognizing that showing up to your primary job on Monday sharp and functional is worth more than showing up foggy and mistake-prone because you worked seven days straight.

The strategic no is a financial tool. It's an investment in future performance. And it's one that almost nobody at the bottom of the income spectrum feels they have permission to use.

You have permission. Not from me — from the math.

The Close

Bill Perkins has a concept he calls "net worth to zero" — the idea that your money should approach zero as your life approaches its end, because money unspent is life unlived.

Marcus's money approaches zero every two weeks, like clockwork. Not because he's maximizing his life experiences. Because the alarm goes off at 4:45 and the bus leaves at 5:22 and the warehouse doesn't

care that he's tired and the restaurant supply store doesn't know about the warehouse and the rent is due on the first regardless of what his body or his brain or his will to keep doing this has to say about it.

But here's what Marcus could do, and here's what you can do: the math. Calculate the true hourly wage. Run the rest audit. Apply the filters before saying yes to more work. Batch the errands. Use the library. Find the three hours per week that are being wasted and aim them at something — anything — that changes the trajectory even slightly.

You probably can't turn the dial from "survival" to "thriving" this month. But you might be able to move it a click. One click is enough to see that it moves. And once you know it moves, you know where to push.

Marcus's alarm goes off at 4:45. Yours might too. But knowing what that time is actually worth — and what it's actually costing you — is the difference between running in place and running somewhere.

The somewhere doesn't have to be far. It just has to be real.

Next chapter: You ARE the Kid Who Didn't Get the Money — on starting from zero when everyone else got a head start.

Chapter 5: Give Money to Your Kids Before You Die

(You ARE the Kid Who Didn't Get the Money)

> "By your 50s, your kids are in their 20s. Give them money now, when it can make the biggest impact on their lives." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
>
> "My mom gave me her gas station rewards card and a warning about men who want to 'hold' your debit card. That was my inheritance." — *A woman in a financial literacy class in Memphis, TN*

The Hook

When I was twenty-two, I got a piece of financial advice from my father. Not a trust fund, not a stock portfolio, not a down payment on a condo, not even a savings bond from when I was born. A piece of *advice.* He said: "Don't ever cosign for nobody."

That was it. That was the intergenerational wealth transfer. The entire legacy, passed down in a Waffle House parking lot with the engine running because the car sometimes didn't start again if you turned it off. Don't cosign for nobody. Thanks, Dad. I'll add that to my portfolio, right next to the negative $38,000 in student loans and the credit card I got at eighteen because a guy at a folding table outside the campus bookstore said I'd get a free T-shirt.

Bill Perkins wants you to give your kids money while they're young enough to use it. He's right — that's genuinely good advice. The problem is that it assumes you *have* money and that *someone gave you money*, and if either of those assumptions is wrong, you're reading Chapter 5 of Perkins' book and it has absolutely nothing to do with your life. You're not the parent optimizing the timing of their wealth transfer. You're the kid who never got one. You're standing on the other side of that equation, and from here, the math looks very different.

The Inversion

Perkins devotes a meaningful section of *Die With Zero* to the idea that you should give your children money when they're young — in their twenties and thirties — rather than making them wait for an inheritance they'll receive in their fifties or sixties, when the money does less good. A twenty-five-year-old with $50,000 can use it to avoid student loan interest, make a down payment, start a business, or invest during the decades when compound interest does its most aggressive work. A fifty-five-year-old inheriting that same $50,000 just adds it to a pile. The utility curve has flattened. The "memory dividend" — Perkins' term for the ongoing value of a good experience or smart financial move — is smaller.

He's not wrong. He's describing a real phenomenon. Early capital has an outsized impact on lifetime outcomes. Economists like James Heckman at the University of Chicago call this "the returns to initial endowment," and the data is overwhelming: a relatively small amount of money given to a young person at the right time can alter their entire financial trajectory. It's one of the most well-documented effects in economic research.

Here's the inversion: **What happens when nobody gives you anything?**

Not "what happens when you get less than optimal." Not "what happens when the inheritance is smaller than you'd like." What happens when the intergenerational transfer is zero — or negative? What happens when instead of receiving a boost at twenty-five, you're *sending money back* to your parents at twenty-five because their car broke down and they don't have the savings to fix it? What happens

when the only thing your family passed down was the knowledge that money is a thing you never have enough of, and maybe a vague sense that credit cards are either salvation or damnation but nobody's quite sure which?

What happens is that you start behind, and the gap compounds.

Perkins is writing from inside a system that, for people with assets, functions as a kind of escalator: each generation steps on a little higher than the last. Grandparents build some wealth, parents build more, kids start from an elevated position and build further. The escalator goes up. The view improves. The assumption of upward momentum becomes so embedded that it feels like physics rather than privilege.

But for tens of millions of American families, there is no escalator. There's a treadmill. Or worse — there's a treadmill that's tilted slightly downhill, so you have to run just to stay in place, and if you stop running for even a second, you slide backward. Your parents didn't have wealth to transfer because *their* parents didn't have wealth to transfer because *their* parents were redlined out of homeownership, or paid in scrip at a company store, or arrived in this country with nothing, or were starting from a position so deep in the negative that three generations of hard work have only managed to get the family back to zero.

You ARE the kid Perkins is talking about. You're just the version who didn't get the money.

And here's what nobody in the wealth-optimization conversation wants to acknowledge: the gap between "received $50,000 at twenty-five" and "received nothing at twenty-five" is not $50,000. It's $50,000 *plus thirty years of compound growth on that $50,000, plus the avoided interest on debt that money could have eliminated, plus the career opportunities that a financial cushion enables, plus the psychological freedom of knowing you won't end up homeless if you take a risk.* By the time both people are fifty-five, the gap between them isn't a gap. It's a canyon. And the person on the wrong side of it has been running full speed the entire time.

So this chapter isn't about when to give money to your kids. It's about what to do when you're the kid who got nothing — and how to build something anyway, and how to make sure the cycle has a shot at breaking even if you can't break it with a check.

The Reality

What Wealthy Families Actually Transfer

Let's start with the uncomfortable truth: when we talk about "generational wealth transfer," we're not just talking about cash. Money is the most visible part. It is not the most important part.

Here's what families with assets actually pass down to their children:

Money and assets. Yes, obviously. The median inheritance in the United States is somewhere around $69,000, according to Federal Reserve Survey of Consumer Finances data — but that number is wildly misleading because it's skewed by the majority of families who inherit nothing at all. Among families that *do* receive an inheritance, the median is significantly higher, and among wealthy families, it's transformative. But even modest amounts — $5,000, $10,000, $20,000 — given at the right moment can change a trajectory. A down payment. A semester of tuition without loans. The first and last month's rent on an apartment in a city with better jobs.

Networks. This is the one that doesn't show up on a balance sheet but might matter more than anything. If your parents are professionals, you grow up knowing professionals. You know how to talk to them. You know what they wear, how they email, what questions to ask in an interview. You have an uncle who knows a guy at a firm, or a family friend who can get you an internship, or a parent who can call someone and make an introduction. This isn't nepotism in the mustache-twirling villain sense — it's just the water that certain families swim in. And if your family doesn't have those networks, you show up to the professional world like a tourist who doesn't speak the language.

Financial knowledge. Kids in wealthy families absorb financial literacy by osmosis. They hear their parents talk about mortgages, investments, tax strategy. They understand what a 401(k) is before they understand algebra. They see money as a tool — something to be managed and deployed. Kids in families without assets absorb a different lesson: money is a source of stress, a thing that runs out, a subject that makes people fight. The financial education gap isn't about intelligence. It's about exposure.

Safety nets. This might be the biggest one. When you grow up with family money behind you, you take risks differently. You

can take the unpaid internship because your parents cover rent. You can start a business because failure doesn't mean homelessness. You can negotiate a higher salary because you're not desperate. You can move to a city with better opportunities because you have a couch to sleep on and a credit card your parents will help pay if things get tight.

The safety net doesn't just catch you when you fall — it changes how you walk. It makes you bolder, more strategic, more willing to invest in yourself. People without safety nets aren't less ambitious. They're more afraid, and they're right to be, because the consequences of failure are catastrophic rather than inconvenient.

Matthew Desmond, in *Poverty, by America*, puts it plainly: poverty doesn't just mean having less. It means being *exploited more*. The systems that serve wealthy families *extract from* poor ones. And that extraction happens across generations, compounding the same way that wealth does, just in the wrong direction.

The Compound Disadvantage

Let's make this concrete with numbers, because the numbers are where the outrage lives.

Imagine two twenty-two-year-olds. Same degree. Same entry-level job paying $35,000 a year. Same city. Same rent. The only difference: Person A received $10,000 from their parents at graduation. Person B received nothing — and has $30,000 in student loans at 5% interest.

Person A puts that $10,000 in an index fund averaging 7% annual returns and doesn't touch it. Person B starts making minimum payments on their student loans — $320 a month for ten years, money that cannot be invested, saved, or used for a down payment.

Fast-forward to age 42. Person A's original $10,000 has grown to roughly $38,700 — plus twenty years of even modest $200/month investing adds another $104,000. Total: approximately $142,700. Person B couldn't start investing until 32, when the loans were finally paid off (total paid: $38,400, including $8,400 in interest). Ten years of $200/month investing plus a late-start $10,000 lump sum gets them to approximately $54,270.

The gap at 42: approximately $88,000. From an initial difference of $10,000 and a student loan.

In reality, the gap is larger. Person B is more likely to miss payments, take on credit card debt, or face emergencies during the decade they're paying loans instead of investing. The Brookings Institution has modeled these scenarios extensively and found that initial wealth advantages don't just persist — they accelerate. Wealth begets wealth. Debt begets debt. The gap between "started at modest positive" and "started at zero or negative" widens with every passing year, because the person with the head start is earning returns on their returns while the person behind is paying interest on their interest.

And we haven't even talked about race.

The Wealth Gap Inside the Wealth Gap

The median white family in the United States has approximately $188,200 in net worth, according to the Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finances. The median Black family has approximately $24,100. The median Hispanic family has approximately $36,100.

Read those numbers again. The median white family has roughly *eight times* the wealth of the median Black family. Not income — wealth. Assets minus debts. The stuff you can pass down.

This isn't an accident. It's the result of specific, documented, traceable policies: slavery, sharecropping, convict leasing, Jim Crow, redlining, the GI Bill's discriminatory implementation, predatory lending targeted at Black and Hispanic communities, exclusion from labor unions, and on and on and on. Every generation's attempt to build wealth was met with a policy designed to prevent exactly that. The racial wealth gap isn't a mystery to be solved — it's a receipt to be read.

The racial gap and the class gap aren't competing explanations. They're layers of the same system. And if you're poor *and* a person of color, you're experiencing both layers simultaneously, and the compound effect is devastating.

The "First Generation" Tax

Here's something that doesn't get talked about enough: the cost of being the first person in your family to navigate a system.

If you're the first person in your family to go to college, you don't just pay tuition. You pay a "first-generation tax" — the cost

of figuring out every single thing that kids from college-educated families already know. How to fill out the FAFSA. That you *should* fill out the FAFSA. That you should go to office hours. That you need to start looking for a job six months before graduation, not two weeks before. Every piece of institutional knowledge that other kids absorbed from their parents, you have to learn by trial and error, and the errors cost money.

The same tax applies to every system. First person in your family to buy a house? You don't know about PMI, escrow, the difference between pre-qualification and pre-approval, or that you should get your own inspection and not trust the seller's. First person to negotiate a salary? You don't know that the first number is never the real number, that benefits are negotiable, that you should get everything in writing. First person to deal with the IRS? You don't know about the Earned Income Tax Credit, which is literally free money for low-income workers that millions of eligible people don't claim because nobody told them it exists.

The first-generation tax isn't a one-time cost. It's levied on every new system you encounter, for your entire life. And it's invisible to people who never had to pay it, which is why they can't understand why you're not further along.

The Playbook

Alright. That's the diagnosis. Here's the treatment plan. And unlike most treatment plans, this one doesn't require insurance.

This Playbook is structured in three parts because it's doing three different jobs: Part 1 is the financial literacy foundation you were never given. Part 2 is about breaking the cycle even without money. Part 3 is about what you can pass down that doesn't require a check. Take them in order or jump to the part you need most.

Part 1: The Financial Literacy Crash Course You Should Have Gotten at Seventeen

Fair warning: the next several pages are going to read more like a reference manual than a narrative. That's on purpose. This is the financial literacy crash course that should have been taught in high school but wasn't — the stuff wealthy families absorb by osmosis

and nobody else gets told. It's not glamorous. It's the financial equivalent of learning where the fuse box is before the lights go out.

If you already know the difference between a credit score and a credit report, skip to Part 2. If not, this is the chapter paying the first-generation tax on your behalf. Come back to it whenever you need it.

Your credit score. A three-digit number (300-850) that determines how expensive it is to borrow money, rent an apartment, or sometimes get a job. Calculated by Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion — none of which you chose and all of which have been hacked. Welcome to America.

What goes into it: - **Payment history (35%):** The biggest factor. One late payment can drop your score 50-100 points. Set up autopay for the minimum on everything — the minimum on time is infinitely better than a bigger payment that's late. - **Credit utilization (30%):** How much of your available credit you're using. Below 30% is the target; below 10% is better. Pay down a card and your score can jump within a month — this is the fastest lever. - **Length of credit history (15%):** Never close your oldest credit card. Sock it in a drawer and buy gum on it every six months so it stays active. - **Credit mix (10%):** Different types of credit (revolving, installment) help slightly. - **New inquiries (10%):** Each application dings your score a few points. Space them out. Checking your *own* score is a "soft inquiry" — no impact.

Check your credit for free at AnnualCreditReport.com (the only legit one). The FTC found one in five consumers had a verified error on at least one report. Dispute errors directly with the bureau — it's free and your legal right.

Your pay stub. The translation: **Gross pay** is what you earned before anyone took their cut. **Federal income tax** is the IRS's share, based on your W-4 (if you're getting a huge refund every year, your withholding is too high — adjust it). **State income tax** is your state's share, if applicable. **Social Security (FICA)** is 6.2% of your gross. **Medicare** is 1.45%. **Net pay** is what you actually receive — the number that has to cover everything.

Someone making $35,000 gross takes home roughly $28,000-$29,000. That $6,000-$7,000 gap feels enormous because it is. But some of it can come back — which brings us to:

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). One of the most powerful anti-poverty tools in the tax code, and there's a disturbingly

high chance nobody has told you about it. The maximum EITC for a family with three or more children is over $7,000. It is *refundable* — even if you owe zero in taxes, you get the money. Roughly 20% of eligible taxpayers don't claim it. If you earn under approximately $60,000, check your eligibility with the IRS's EITC Assistant tool online — it takes ten minutes. If you've been eligible in past years, you can amend returns for the past three years and get the money retroactively. File your taxes even if you think you owe nothing. *Especially* if you owe nothing — that's when the credits come to you.

Good debt vs. bad debt. Not all debt is the same. **Good debt** builds an asset or increases earning power: a mortgage, student loans (if the degree actually pays off), a small business loan. **Bad debt** funds consumption at high interest: credit card balances at 20%+, payday loans, car loans you can't afford. **The gray zone:** a car loan for a reliable vehicle that gets you to work is arguably good debt even though the car depreciates, because without it you have no income. The key metric isn't "do I have debt" — it's "what is this debt costing me and what is it getting me?"

How insurance actually works. You pay a regular amount (**premium**) to transfer risk to a company that pools it across millions of people. The key terms: **deductible** (what you pay before insurance kicks in), **copay** (fixed per-visit cost), **coinsurance** (your percentage after the deductible), and **out-of-pocket maximum** (the most you'll pay in a year — this is what you're really insuring against).

If you're healthy and broke, the math often favors a high-deductible plan with a lower premium. If you have a chronic condition, do the math both ways — add up expected costs under each plan. The "cheapest" plan is the one with the lowest *total* cost (premiums + expected out-of-pocket), not the lowest premium.

Part 2: Breaking the Cycle Without a Check to Write

You've made it this far. You're the kid who didn't get the money. You might have kids of your own now, or you might someday. The question isn't "how do I give them $50,000 at twenty-five" — you don't have it. The question is: how do I make sure they start a little further ahead than I did?

Talk about money. Out loud. Honestly. The single most powerful thing you can do for your kids' financial future costs nothing: break the silence. In most families without wealth, money is either a source of shame (we don't talk about it), a source of conflict (we only talk about it when we're fighting), or a source of anxiety (we talk about it in worried whispers). Kids absorb all of this.

Instead: let them see you make financial decisions. Not performatively — just transparently. "We're choosing the store-brand cereal because it's $2 cheaper and it tastes the same, and that $2 is going into our savings jar." "I'm paying this bill online right now — see how I check the amount and the due date?" "We can't afford that right now, and that's okay. Let's talk about what we *can* do."

This is not about burdening your kids with financial stress. It's about demystifying money so they don't grow up thinking it's this invisible force that controls everything but can never be discussed. Rich families talk about money constantly — that's half of how they stay rich. You can give your kids the same advantage with words instead of dollars.

Teach them the game before the game starts. None of this costs money. All of it gives your kid something most financial literacy programs don't — practice:

- *The envelope game (for young kids):* Get three envelopes. Label them Spend, Save, Give. When they get any money — birthday, chores, found a quarter on the ground — they split it into the three envelopes. The specific amounts don't matter. The habit of dividing money into purposes matters.
- *The grocery store classroom (for all ages):* Take them shopping and make it a math lesson. Compare unit prices. Calculate the per-ounce cost of the big box vs. the small box. Let them figure out which is the better deal. This is more useful than any worksheet.
- *The bill review (for older kids):* Once they're old enough, sit down with a household bill — phone, electric, whatever — and walk through it. What are we paying for? What are these fees? Is there a cheaper option? Teaching them to *read* a bill is teaching them to question charges, which is teaching them to advocate for themselves financially.
- *The "what would you do?" game:* Give them a scenario. "You have $100. Rent is $50. Food is $30. You need $10 for gas. What do you do with the last $10?" There's no wrong answer

— the point is to practice making allocation decisions. This is budgeting without calling it budgeting, and it costs zero dollars.

Open a custodial account — even with $25. A custodial brokerage account (UGMA/UTMA) can be opened at most online brokerages with very little money. You can start with $25 or $50. Put it in a broad market index fund and set it to reinvest dividends. Then add what you can, when you can. Five dollars here. Ten dollars there.

Will this turn into a $50,000 inheritance? Almost certainly not. But it does two things that matter: it gives your kid an *actual investment account* they can see and learn from, and it means they start their adult life with *something* rather than nothing. Even $500 at eighteen is a different starting line than $0 at eighteen. It's the difference between having a security deposit and not having one. Between being able to hold out for a better job and having to take the first one offered.

Some specifics: - **UGMA/UTMA accounts** are simple custodial accounts. You manage them until the kid turns 18 or 21 (depending on state), then the money is theirs. Downside: it's their money, legally. They could spend it on something stupid. Upside: it's easy to open and there are no restrictions on what the money can be used for. - **529 plans** are education-specific savings accounts with tax advantages. Good if you're confident your kid will go to college. Less good if they might go into a trade, start a business, or need the money for something else. Recent changes allow rolling unused 529 funds into a Roth IRA (up to $35,000 lifetime, with conditions), which makes them more flexible than they used to be. - **Roth IRA for a kid with earned income:** If your teenager has a job — even a part-time one — they can open a Roth IRA. You can contribute up to the amount of their earned income (to a cap of $7,000/year as of recent limits). Even $500 in a Roth IRA at age sixteen, left untouched until retirement, becomes approximately $35,000 at age 66 at a 7% return (punch it into any compound interest calculator online — investor.gov has a free one). From five hundred dollars. If you can help them start this, you are giving them a gift that costs less than a car payment and could matter more than almost anything else.

Model recovery, not perfection. Your kids don't need to see you be perfect with money. They need to see you *handle it* when

you're not. They need to see you make a mistake, acknowledge it, figure out a plan, and follow through. "I messed up and spent more than we had this month. Here's how I'm going to fix it." That's more valuable than any trust fund, because it teaches resilience in the face of financial stress — which is the most common financial experience they will ever have.

Rich kids learn that money is a tool for optimization. Your kids need to learn that money is a tool for survival first, then stability, then — eventually — growth. And that the skills you build in survival mode are genuine advantages: the ability to stretch a dollar, to negotiate, to prioritize ruthlessly, to find the deal, to go without. These aren't deficiencies. They're competencies. They just don't look like competencies when you're in the middle of them.

Part 3: Giving What You Actually Have

Perkins talks about "memory dividends" — the idea that an experience gives you value not just when it happens, but every time you remember it. He's talking about trips to Tuscany. Let me talk about something else.

The memory dividend of growing up poor isn't all bad. I know — that sounds dangerously close to "poverty builds character," and I want to be clear: poverty doesn't build character. Poverty gave me insomnia, a hair-trigger stress response, and a lifelong distrust of optimism. But *surviving* poverty? Surviving poverty with people who love you, who figure it out together, who treat every small victory as cause for celebration? That builds something real.

The memory of your mom figuring out how to make a birthday cake out of whatever was in the pantry because the money wasn't there for a bakery cake. The memory of your dad teaching you to fix something instead of replacing it, not as a lifestyle choice but because there was no other option. The memory of the whole family cramming into a free event — a library reading, a park festival, a church dinner — and having a genuinely great time because the company was the point, not the venue.

These aren't consolation prizes. They're data points. They're proof that joy isn't proportional to expenditure, and that competence isn't correlated with wealth. Your kids are watching you solve impossible problems every month. They're learning things that kids in wealthier families never have to learn. The goal isn't to roman-

ticize that — it's to make sure they also learn the technical skills (credit, investing, negotiation, tax strategy) that wealthier families teach alongside the comfort.

Here's what you can give your kids without money:

Financial transparency. As discussed above. The conversation itself is the inheritance.

Your network, such as it is. You might not know a partner at a law firm, but you know people who work hard, who've navigated systems, who have skills. Introduce your kids to the adults in your life who are good at things. Let them see that competence comes in many forms. A plumber who runs a successful business knows more about entrepreneurship than most MBA grads.

The expectation of self-advocacy. Teach them to ask. For financial aid. For raises. For better terms. For explanations of bills they don't understand. For the manager. Many people who grew up without resources were taught, implicitly or explicitly, not to make waves — to be grateful for what they get and not ask for more. This is how exploitation sustains itself. Teach your kids to ask anyway. The worst anyone can say is no, and they were already getting no.

A crash course in how systems actually work. Take them to a bank and open a savings account together. Walk them through applying for financial aid. Show them how to read a lease. Explain what a W-2 is. Go through the process of filing a simple tax return. Every system they understand before they encounter it alone is a first-generation tax they don't have to pay.

The understanding that their starting line is not their fault. This is crucial. Kids who grow up poor often internalize the narrative that poverty is a personal failing — because that's the story America tells. Dismantle that story. Explain, in age-appropriate terms, that some families have money and some don't, and it has almost nothing to do with how hard people work or how smart they are. Give them the systemic context. Not to make them angry (though anger has its uses), but to make them *accurate*. A kid who understands that the game is tilted is better equipped to play it than a kid who thinks they're just bad at games.

The Close

Bill Perkins wants to optimize the timing of intergenerational wealth transfers. That's a legitimate project for people who have wealth to transfer. And it matters — his core insight is correct: money given early has more impact than money given late, and waiting until you die to pass it along is genuinely wasteful.

But for the rest of us — the ones who are the kids in that equation, the ones who received nothing or less than nothing, the ones building from zero or below — the project is different. The project is to build the floor yourself. To learn what nobody taught you. To pass down what you can, even when what you can feels absurdly small compared to what others give. To raise kids who are financially literate in a way you never got to be, who start their lives with even a slightly better understanding of how the game works, and who know — because you told them, directly and honestly — that where they started is not where they have to stay.

You didn't get the money. You didn't get the networks, the knowledge, the safety net, or the quiet confidence that comes from knowing the system was designed with you in mind. And yet here you are, reading a chapter about breaking the cycle. Which means the cycle, whatever else it has going for it, doesn't have your cooperation anymore.

That $25 custodial account you opened last Tuesday isn't going to make your kid a millionaire. But it's going to make them a person who has an investment account, which is going to make them a person who understands how markets work, which is going to make them a person who starts investing in their twenties instead of their forties, which is going to make them a person who gives *their* kid $10,000 at twenty-five.

You're not in the Perkins story. You're writing the one that comes before it — the one nobody made a bestseller out of, because it's less fun to read about building the foundation than about decorating the penthouse.

I think about that Waffle House parking lot sometimes — my dad's car idling because he didn't trust it to start again, handing me the only financial advice he had. He couldn't give me a portfolio. He gave me a sentence. And here I am, trying to turn that sentence into a chapter, so your kid gets a little more than mine did.

Don't cosign for nobody, though. Your dad was right about that one.

Next chapter: "Bold Moves" — Perkins says to take big risks when you're young. We'll look at what risk actually means when failure isn't a learning experience, it's an eviction notice.

Chapter 6: Bold Moves When You Can't Afford to Fail

"You should be taking the most risk when you have the least to lose." —*Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
*"*I have the least to lose? Brother, I have the* most* to lose. I just have the least to lose it *from." —A warehouse shift lead, age 29, who did not take the author's suggestion to start a dropshipping business*

The Hook

Darius (a composite character drawn from several real situations) was twenty-six, debt-free by the skin of his teeth, and pulling $16.50 an hour as a CNC machine operator in a town outside Memphis. He had a working car — not a good car, but a car that started — a studio apartment he could almost afford, and about $1,100 in a savings account he'd been building for two years.

Then his cousin showed him a YouTube video. You know the kind. A guy standing in front of a rented Lamborghini explaining how anyone — *anyone* — can start a business, be their own boss, and achieve financial freedom. The guy's teeth were very white. His confidence was perfectly calibrated to make Darius feel both inspired and slightly ashamed of his CNC machine. His enthusiasm was genuine, which somehow made it worse — he clearly believed every word he was saying, which meant Darius couldn't even dismiss him as a

con artist. The guy said the magic words: "What's the worst that can happen?"

Darius could have answered that question in granular detail. The worst that could happen was losing his $1,100 — two years of $20-here, $30-there — on an inventory of phone cases that nobody bought from a Shopify store that nobody visited. The worst that could happen was that he'd cut his hours to work on the "business," lose his full-time status, lose his health insurance, and then get a kidney stone, because the universe has a sense of timing that borders on literary. The worst that could happen was not failure in the abstract. It was failure in the specific: being back at zero, except now zero was two years further away from $1,100.

Darius didn't start the business. He used his $1,100 to pay for a welding certification at the community college. Took him four months of Saturday classes. His new hourly rate: $24. Annual difference: roughly $15,600.

Not as cinematic as the Lamborghini video. Considerably more effective.

The Inversion

Bill Perkins wants you to be bold. He's right about the underlying principle — timidity is expensive over a lifetime. The person who never takes a shot never scores, and the person who never asks for the raise never gets it. Perkins argues, correctly, that young people should take more risks because they have the most time to recover from failure. At twenty-five, a failed business is a learning experience. At sixty-five, it's a retirement plan in ashes.

Here's what Perkins doesn't say, because he doesn't have to: boldness is subsidized by safety nets.

When Perkins says "take risks while you're young," he's imagining a particular kind of young person. Someone with a college degree, no dependents, maybe a few thousand in savings, parents who could float them a month's rent in a crisis, and an employment market that treats their resume like currency rather than scratch paper. For that person, "be bold" means: start the company. Move to the new city. Quit the stable job for the exciting one. If it doesn't work, you land on something soft — a couch to crash on, a credit card with a real

limit, a family member who can bridge the gap, a resume that opens doors even after a failure.

Now rerun the scenario without the net.

"Be bold" when you're poor means: ask for that raise and hope your boss doesn't decide you're ungrateful. Apply for that better job and pray you can afford the gap between your last paycheck here and your first paycheck there. Tell your landlord the apartment has black mold and hope he fixes it instead of declining to renew your lease. Say no to the overtime shift because your kid is sick, and hope "no" doesn't become the reason your hours get cut next month.

For Perkins, risk is an optimization problem. For people without a cushion, risk is a survival calculation. And the math is entirely different.

Here's the asymmetry that the "be bold" crowd never addresses: when you have $10 million and you lose $100,000 on a venture, your life doesn't change. You're annoyed. You have a story for dinner parties. You write it off — literally, on your taxes. When you have $2,000 and you lose $500, your life changes *this week*. You don't make rent. Or you make rent but you don't eat well. Or you eat but you skip the car insurance payment, and now you're driving uninsured, which means one fender bender becomes a legal crisis. Five hundred dollars, at the bottom, isn't a setback. It's a cascade.

The conventional wisdom says risk tolerance should be highest when you're young because you have time to recover. But time isn't the only variable. You also need *resources* to recover, and *stability* from which to rebuild. If you blow up your financial life at twenty-five and you have educated parents, a professional network, and a credit score north of 700, recovery looks like six uncomfortable months. If you blow up your financial life at twenty-five and you have none of those things, recovery looks like two to five years of clawing back to where you already were.

So the Perkins inversion isn't "don't take risks." It's this: **risk-taking advice designed for people with safety nets is actively dangerous for people without them.** The framework has to change. Not the ambition — the framework.

The good news — and there is good news, because this chapter has a playbook and not just a eulogy — is that there are kinds of boldness that don't require a net. Moves where the upside is real and the downside won't kill you. The trick is learning to tell the difference.

The Reality

Why "Just Start a Business" Is the Most Irresponsible Advice in Personal Finance

Let's look at the numbers. Not the motivational stories — the numbers.

The United States has built an entire cultural mythology around entrepreneurship, but the data tells a different story than the mythology does. We worship founders. We tell their stories as if they emerged from pure grit and vision, conveniently omitting the part where most of them started with capital, connections, or both. Jeff Bezos launched Amazon with a $245,573 investment from his parents. Bill Gates' mother sat on the board of United Way with the CEO of IBM. Elon Musk's family owned an emerald mine. Even the supposed exceptions prove the rule: Sara Blakely started Spanx with $5,000 — but she had a college degree, a stable salary paying her bills while she developed the product, and enough cushion that $5,000 was a bet she could afford to lose. These are not rags-to-riches stories. They're riches-to-more-riches stories with good PR — or, in the best case, stability-to-riches stories repackaged as rags.

Here's the data on small business survival, stripped of narrative:

- Bureau of Labor Statistics: 20% of new businesses fail in year one. 50% are gone by year five. 65% by year ten.
- Those failure rates include businesses started by people with capital, education, industry experience, and professional networks. For businesses started without those advantages, the rates are worse — though precise data is hard to isolate, because many of those businesses don't survive long enough to appear in the formal statistics.
- The Kauffman Foundation's longitudinal research shows that the median new business founder has a household net worth of over $100,000. The typical entrepreneur is already comfortable.
- Small Business Administration: average startup cost is $30,000-$40,000. Even "low-cost" businesses typically require $2,000-$5,000 in startup costs, plus enough runway to survive months before meaningful revenue.

If your total savings are $1,100 and your rent is due on the first, "startup costs plus runway" is not a category that exists in your budget.

But the financial cost isn't even the biggest problem. The biggest problem is *opportunity cost*.

When a wealthy person starts a business, the opportunity cost is a salary. When a poor person starts a business, the opportunity cost is *stability itself* — every hour on the business is an hour not earning rent money, every dollar invested is a dollar removed from the razor-thin margin between housed and not housed. The wealthy entrepreneur who fails goes back to employment. The poor entrepreneur who fails goes back to zero — or below zero, if they took on debt.

The data from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis and the Survey of Consumer Finances tells a consistent story: entrepreneurship in the United States functions more as a wealth-preservation strategy for the already-wealthy than as a wealth-creation strategy for the poor. The numbers:

- Households headed by business owners have a median net worth roughly four times higher than non-business-owner households — but most of that wealth existed *before* the business started.
- Entrepreneurs in the bottom income quartile were 60% more likely to end up with lower net worth five years later compared to similar non-entrepreneurs.
- "Necessity entrepreneurs" — people who start businesses because they lack better options — have failure rates 20-30% higher than "opportunity entrepreneurs" who start from stable positions.

The pattern is clear. People with assets start businesses, businesses build more assets, and the cycle reinforces itself. People without assets who start businesses are statistically likely to end up worse off than they started. The reason isn't that poor people are bad entrepreneurs — it's that entrepreneurship, as it's structured in this country, requires capital to survive the early unprofitable period, and capital is exactly what poor people don't have.

So when someone with a Lamborghini in their YouTube thumbnail tells you to "just start a business," the data says there's a 50-70% chance that advice makes your life materially worse.

The Courage Tax

Here's something that doesn't show up in any financial textbook: **being bold costs more when you're poor.**

Not in dollars — in *courage*.

Asking for a raise when you're a senior VP with a headhunter in your inbox is a negotiation. Asking for a raise when you're a shift worker whose boss has made it clear that workers are replaceable is an act of genuine bravery. The senior VP's worst-case scenario is that they don't get the raise. The shift worker's worst-case scenario is that they get labeled a troublemaker, their hours get cut, or they get let go for some unrelated reason that happens to materialize two weeks after the conversation.

This is the courage tax: the psychological cost of taking action when the stakes are asymmetrically high. Every "bold move" that middle-class advice books toss off as obvious — negotiate your salary, change jobs, move to a better market, go back to school — carries a surcharge when you're living without a buffer. It costs more nerve, more planning, more emotional labor, and more recovery time if it goes wrong.

The bandwidth tax doesn't leave a lot of bandwidth for "be bold and take risks."

The courage tax is real, it's measurable, and it's regressive — it hits hardest at the bottom. The playbook that follows is designed specifically to minimize it.

Risk Asymmetry: A Framework

Not all risks are created equal, and understanding the difference is the single most valuable financial skill nobody teaches in school.

Here's the framework, stripped to the studs:

Capital-based risk is when you put money on the line. Starting a business, investing in stocks, buying property. The upside can be enormous, but so can the downside, and the downside is denominated in dollars you may not have.

Skills-based risk is when you put time and effort on the line. Learning a new skill, getting a certification, applying for a job above your current level, building a network, practicing a craft. The upside can be substantial — higher income, more options, better leverage. The downside is that you spent time on something that didn't pan

out. Your rent is still paid. Your savings are intact. You're in the same position you started, minus some hours and plus some knowledge.

For people with capital, both types of risk are available and often complementary. For people without capital, **skills-based risk is the only risk that makes sense.** And the good news is that skills-based risk has a peculiar property: it almost never goes to zero. Even a failed attempt at learning something new leaves you with partial knowledge, new connections, or at minimum, a clearer understanding of what doesn't work.

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York publishes data on the wage premium associated with various credentials and certifications. The numbers are striking. A certified welder earns an average of $5-$12 more per hour than a non-certified welder doing similar work. A Certified Nursing Assistant makes $2-$5 more per hour than an uncertified aide. A CompTIA A+ certification — which costs about $350 to sit for and can be self-studied — opens the door to entry-level IT jobs that pay $18-$25 an hour in most markets.

These aren't million-dollar payoffs. They're $5,000-to-$25,000-a-year payoffs, achieved through investments of $200 to $2,000 and a few months of study. That's the asymmetric bet: small downside (the cost of a certification and the time to study), large upside (a permanent increase in earning power), and a floor of zero (if you fail the exam, you still have your current job and you've learned something).

Perkins is right that you should take risks when you're young. He's just wrong about what kind.

The Playbook

Here are concrete moves, organized by the amount of risk they carry — from nearly zero-downside to moderate-downside. Every tactic lists what it costs, what it gets you, and when it doesn't work. Because no advice works for everyone, and anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.

Tier 1: No-Cost, No-Risk Bold Moves

These are moves where the downside is literally zero and the upside ranges from modest to life-changing. If you're not doing these, start here.

Apply for jobs you're "not qualified" for.

- **What it costs:** Time. An hour per application, maybe two if you tailor the resume.
- **What it gets you:** A nonzero chance at a higher-paying job. Studies from Hewlett-Packard's internal research (later validated by multiple sources) found that men apply for jobs when they meet 60% of the qualifications, while women apply only when they meet 100%. The people getting those jobs aren't always the most qualified — they're the ones who applied. Job postings are wish lists, not legal requirements. If you meet 50-60% of the listed qualifications, apply. The worst they can say is nothing, because most rejections are just silence.
- **When it doesn't work:** When the gap is genuinely too large (you can't talk your way into surgery), or when you're blasting generic applications instead of tailoring. Five targeted apps beat thirty generic ones.

Negotiate your pay.

- **What it costs:** One uncomfortable conversation.
- **What it gets you:** According to salary.com's compensation data, the average successful salary negotiation results in a 5-7% increase. On a $35,000 salary, that's $1,750-$2,450 per year — compounding every year for the rest of your career. Over a 30-year working life, one successful negotiation at age 25 is worth $52,000 to $73,000 in cumulative additional earnings, even without further raises.
- **When it doesn't work:** When your employer has rigid pay scales with no flexibility (common in retail, fast food, and some unionized positions). When you've been at the job less than a year. When the company is actively doing layoffs. Read the room. The negotiation isn't just "ask for more" — it's "ask for more when the conditions favor your ask." If your boss just lost a budget fight, wait three months.
- **How to minimize the courage tax:** Write a script. Practice it out loud. Have the conversation on a day when you're not already stressed. And frame it as a market adjustment, not a

demand: "I've looked at what this role pays in our area, and I'd like to discuss bringing my compensation in line with the market." You're not begging. You're presenting data.

Use free learning platforms — strategically, not recreationally.

- **What it costs:** Time.
- **What it gets you:** Skills that translate to higher-paying roles. But — and this is critical — not all free learning is created equal. Watching YouTube videos about Python for six months without building anything is a hobby, not a career move. The distinction: *strategic learning has a specific job title at the end of it.* Before you start learning anything, identify three job postings that require that skill and pay more than you currently earn. If you can't find three, learn something else.
- **When it doesn't work:** When the skill you're learning has no clear path to higher income. Learning to code is valuable if you're targeting a specific role. Learning to code "because it seems useful" often leads to six months of tutorials, an abandoned GitHub account, and the same hourly rate.
- **Best free resources that aren't garbage:** freeCodeCamp (web development), Khan Academy (math, science, computing), Coursera's audit track (university-level courses, free if you don't need the certificate), OSHA 10/30 (available free through some programs — required for many construction and warehouse jobs).

Tier 2: Low-Cost, Low-Risk Bold Moves

These cost money, but less than a month's rent. The downside is survivable. The upside is structural.

Get a certification that raises your hourly rate.

- **What it costs:** $100 to $1,500, depending on the field. Plus study time — typically two to six months.
- **What it gets you:** A credential that permanently increases your earning power. Chapter 8 walks through the full menu — CNA, CDL, CompTIA, welding, phlebotomy, trades — with costs, timelines, and failure modes for each. The short version: $200-$2,000 invested in the right certification can raise your hourly rate by $3-$12. That's $6,000-$25,000 a year, every year, from a single skills-based bet.

- **When it doesn't work:** When you can't afford the certification cost even at the low end. (In that case, look for employer-sponsored or state-funded programs — they exist, and we'll list them in Appendix B.) Also when the certification is in a field with no local demand. A welding cert is worth less in a city with no manufacturing. Check your local job boards *before* you enroll. If there aren't jobs listed, the certification is a decoration, not an investment.

Move strategically for opportunity.

- **What it costs:** Moving expenses ($1,000-$5,000), plus the stress and disruption of relocation.
- **What it gets you:** Access to a stronger labor market. The difference in median wages between, say, rural Mississippi and the Research Triangle in North Carolina can be $8,000-$15,000 per year for the same job. Geographic arbitrage — moving from a low-wage market to a higher-wage market — is one of the most powerful wealth-building tools available to workers without capital.
- **When it doesn't work:** When you have kids in school, elderly parents who need care, a custody arrangement that keeps you in the area, or a support network you can't afford to lose. Social infrastructure is a real asset, and uprooting it has costs that don't show up on a spreadsheet. Also: higher wages often come with higher cost of living, so do the math *net of housing costs* before you move. A $5,000 raise that comes with a $6,000 rent increase is a pay cut in disguise.
- **How to fund it when you're broke:** Start with the job offer — some employers in labor-shortage industries (warehousing, healthcare, trades) offer relocation assistance or signing bonuses. If not, the move becomes a savings target: $1,500-$2,500 for a minimal move (borrow a truck, crash with someone the first week, first month's rent plus deposit). Tax refund season is the most common funding window. Selling furniture you'd replace anyway covers part of it. The math has to work on paper before you pack a box.
- **How to minimize risk:** Get the job *before* you move. Remote interviews are standard now. Don't move on faith — move on a signed offer letter.

Switch industries, not just jobs.

- **What it costs:** Time to research, retrain (sometimes), and job-search in an unfamiliar field.
- **What it gets you:** Escape from low-wage industry traps. This is an underappreciated move. If you've been in food service for eight years, your raises are fighting against an industry wage ceiling of roughly $14-$18/hour for non-management roles. Switching to a skilled trade, healthcare support, or IT support doesn't just change your current pay — it changes the *ceiling*. The trajectory matters more than the starting point.
- **When it doesn't work:** When the credentials cost more than you have, or when your family can't absorb a pay cut during transition. The fix: get the credentials while keeping the current job — evening and weekend programs exist for most certifications above — then switch.

The Bold Move Framework

Everything above is a menu — specific moves with known costs and known payoffs. But life will hand you decisions that aren't on the menu. A friend offers you a stake in their business. A job opens up in another state. Someone suggests you take out a loan to fund training. For any risk bigger than the ones above, run it through this filter before you commit. Five questions, index-card sized, no MBA required.

The Bold Move Filter:

1. **Is the upside large?** Not "interesting." Not "could be cool." Large. Measured in dollars per hour, dollars per year, or doors opened. If the upside is vague ("it'll be a good experience"), it's not a bold move — it's a gamble.
2. **Is the downside survivable?** This is the critical question. Survivable means: *if this completely fails, can I still pay rent next month? Will I still have health insurance? Will my kids still have stability?* If the answer to any of those is no, the move is not bold. It's reckless. Bold and reckless look identical from the outside. From the inside, they're separated by a safety margin.

   Hard stop — housing: If the move could leave you without stable shelter, it fails the filter automatically. Homelessness isn't a setback — it's a trap with teeth. The National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates the average cost of a

single episode of homelessness at $30,000-$50,000 in societal costs alone. The personal cost is incalculable. No opportunity is worth that exposure.

Hard stop — health insurance: If the move requires giving up health coverage, even temporarily, the risk calculation changes fundamentally. One emergency room visit without insurance can generate $10,000 to $100,000 in debt.

Hard stop — your children's stability: Kids need predictability. Pulling them out of school, moving them away from their support systems, or creating household chaos in pursuit of an opportunity places the cost on someone who didn't consent to the risk. Be bold with your own life. Be careful with theirs.

3. **Is the investment primarily time and effort, not money?** If the move requires risking capital you can't afford to lose, it fails the filter. Full stop. You can always earn more time. You cannot always earn more money fast enough to prevent a cascade.

   Hard stop — your emergency fund: If you have one, it's not capital. It's a wall between you and catastrophe. Don't invest it, don't gamble it, don't use it for "just this once" business expenses. Its job is to sit there and keep you safe. Let it do its job.

4. **Is it reversible?** The best bold moves have exit ramps. You can quit the certification program if it's not working. You can go back to your previous job (or a similar one) if the new one is a disaster. You can stop studying for the exam and redirect the time elsewhere. Irreversible moves — signing a lease in a new city before you have the job, quitting before you have the next thing lined up, putting your emergency fund into inventory — are not bold moves. They're bets. And bets, by definition, are things you can afford to lose.

5. **Have you stress-tested it with real numbers?** Not vibes. Numbers. What does it cost, what does it pay, what's the timeline, what's the backup plan? Write it down. If you can't make the numbers work on paper, they won't work in reality either.

Any move that passes all five filters is a good bold move. Take it. Any move that fails on question two — the survivability question — is off the table, no matter how exciting the upside looks.

The Close

Darius — the CNC operator from the top of this chapter — didn't do anything cinematic. He didn't quit his job in a blaze of glory. He didn't max out a credit card on inventory for a business he saw on YouTube. He didn't move to a new city or disrupt anything or pivot or hustle or grind.

He took a Saturday welding class for four months and asked for more money.

That's it. That's the bold move. An $1,100 bet on himself that passed every filter: large upside, survivable downside, time-and-effort investment, reversible, stress-tested with real numbers. Not bold in the way that makes for a good podcast interview. Bold in the way that actually changes a life — quietly, undramatically, and permanently.

Perkins is right that you should take risks while you're young. He's right that timidity has a cost. He's right that the biggest risk of all is reaching the end and wishing you'd done more. But "more" doesn't have to mean "more expensive." It can mean more strategic. More calculated. More aware of what you can't afford to lose.

Be bold. Just be bold with your eyes open, your rent paid, and your emergency fund exactly where you left it.

Next chapter: Perkins says to "time bucket" your life into tidy five-year plans. We'll look at what planning looks like when your horizon is next Friday and the bucket has a hole in it.

Part III: Building Something From Nothing

Chapter 7: Time Bucket Your Life

Your Time Buckets Are: Now, and Later (If You're Lucky)

> "Divide your life into time buckets — typically five- to ten-year periods — and think about what experiences you want to have in each one." —*Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
>
> "My time buckets are Monday through Friday, and they're all full of work." —*Comment on a TikTok budgeting video, 847 likes*

The Hook

There's a particular genre of life-planning exercise that involves sitting down with a glass of wine, a blank journal, and a question like: *What do you want your life to look like in ten years?*

I tried this once. I was twenty-six. I was working the closing shift at a restaurant, picking up morning shifts at a retail store three days a week, and spending the gap between jobs sitting in my car in a parking lot because driving home and back would cost more in gas than just waiting it out. I sat in that parking lot with a free journal I'd gotten at a career fair and tried to envision my life in ten-year increments. Here's what I wrote for the first bucket:

Age 26-30: Try not to lose the apartment.

That was the whole bucket. I stared at it for a while, then used the next page to calculate whether I could afford to fix the rattling

sound my car had started making, or whether I should just turn the radio up louder. The radio option won. It won for about four months, until the rattling became a grinding, and the grinding became a $1,200 repair that I put on a credit card at 22.99% APR. Somewhere out there was a mechanic who'd let me pay in installments, but I didn't know that yet. I didn't know a lot of things yet.

Bill Perkins, if you're reading this: my time bucket for age 26 was "survive the noise my car is making." It did not involve a safari.

The Inversion

In *Die With Zero*, Perkins introduces one of his most compelling ideas: the "time bucket." The concept is genuinely smart. You divide your remaining life into segments — usually five- or ten-year blocks — and you assign experiences to each bucket based on when you'll be physically, financially, and emotionally best positioned to have them. Don't wait until you're seventy to go backpacking in Southeast Asia, because your knees won't cooperate. Don't put off learning to surf until your fifties. Front-load the physical stuff, middle-load the ambitious stuff, back-load the reflective stuff. Die with an empty bucket list and a full memory bank.

It's a framework for intentional living. And I mean that sincerely — if you have the resources to execute it, it's one of the better models I've seen for avoiding the regret trap that catches a lot of high-earners who worked their whole lives and forgot to live.

But here's the thing about time buckets: they assume you're holding the bucket.

Perkins' framework requires several preconditions that are invisible to anyone who has them and glaringly obvious to anyone who doesn't:

Predictable income. You can't plan five years out if you don't know whether you'll be employed five weeks out. Time bucketing requires the assumption that resources will be available when the bucket arrives. If your income fluctuates by 30% month to month — and for gig workers, hourly workers, and contract workers, it does — the concept of assigning experiences to future time periods is a bit like assigning parking spaces on a boat.

Health stability. Perkins rightly notes that your physical capacity changes with age, and you should plan around that. But his model assumes a predictable decline — the natural aging process. It doesn't account for what happens when you're forty-two and your body is already wrecked from twenty years of physical labor, or when you skip the doctor for three years because your deductible is $6,000, and by the time you do go, the thing that was treatable is now chronic. The planning horizon for your physical experience window looks very different when your job is destroying your body in real time.

Career trajectory. Time buckets assume your earning potential follows an arc — up during your working years, then supported by savings and investments in later years. This is a reasonable assumption for salaried professionals. It is a fantasy for the 44% of American workers the Brookings Institution classifies as "low-wage," whose earning potential often flatlines in their thirties and stays there. You can't plan for the spending phase of your life if you never exit the surviving phase.

Psychological bandwidth. And this is the big one. Time bucketing is a planning exercise. It requires you to step outside the present, project yourself into the future, and make deliberate decisions about resource allocation across time. This is exactly the cognitive function that poverty degrades. Their brains are busy — not less capable, just occupied.

This brings us to what is, in my opinion, one of the most important pieces of research in the entire poverty-and-economics literature.

The Reality

The Tunneling Effect

The bandwidth tax and the tunneling effect speak directly to this. When your brain is locked on "how am I going to eat on Thursday," the calm, reflective, future-oriented thinking that time-bucketing requires is neurologically inaccessible. You're not failing to plan because you lack ambition. You're failing to plan because your prefrontal cortex is busy keeping you alive.

The Planning Horizon of Poverty

For someone living paycheck to paycheck, the planning horizon is the next pay period. The U.S. Financial Health Pulse survey consistently finds that among households earning under $30,000, the dominant financial planning timeframe is "the next few weeks." Among households in active financial distress, it shrinks to days.

The JP Morgan Chase Institute found that low-income families experience income swings of 30% or more month-to-month. When your January income is $2,100 and your February income is $1,400 — same job, same hours offered, different hours received — planning beyond the next billing cycle is not a failure of discipline. It's a rational response to an unpredictable environment. When your financial environment is volatile, short-term thinking isn't irrational. It's the correct strategy for the conditions you're actually operating in.

This is the fundamental mismatch between Perkins' time buckets and the reality of low-income life. Time buckets are a long-horizon planning tool designed for a stable environment. Poverty is, by definition, an unstable environment. Asking someone in financial crisis to time-bucket their life is like asking someone in a hurricane to landscape their yard.

The Compounding Crisis Problem

There's another dimension to this that doesn't get enough attention: for people in poverty, crises aren't discrete events. They're chains.

A middle-class person's car breaks down. It's annoying. It's expensive. They pay for the repair, maybe cut back on dining out for a month, and move on. The crisis has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It occupies one time period.

A low-income person's car breaks down. They can't afford the repair. They take the bus, which adds two hours to their commute. The extra commute time means they can't pick up their kid from school, so they need after-care, which costs $80 a week they don't have. They ask a family member to help with pickup, which works until the family member's own schedule changes. They miss a shift because of a transit delay. Missing the shift means a short paycheck. The short paycheck means a late rent payment. The late rent payment means a $75 fee. The fee means they can't afford the bus pass next month.

One broken car. Six cascading crises. And every single one of them shortens the planning horizon further, because each new crisis demands immediate attention and devours the cognitive bandwidth that planning requires.

This is the bandwidth tax — self-reinforcing. Short planning horizons lead to reactive decisions. Reactive decisions lead to suboptimal outcomes. Suboptimal outcomes lead to more scarcity. More scarcity leads to shorter planning horizons. It's a cognitive debt trap, and it runs on the same engine as the financial debt trap: the less you have, the more it costs to have less.

What the Data Actually Shows

Let's be precise about who we're talking about, because the scale matters.

Approximately 73 million American workers are paid hourly, and roughly 44% earn less than $15 an hour. Among them, schedule unpredictability is epidemic: a UC Berkeley Shift Project study found that 80% of food service workers receive their schedules less than two weeks in advance. On any given Monday, millions of workers don't know what their income will be two Fridays from now. Their employer hasn't decided yet.

Layer on the expense side: the CFPB reports that 25% of low-income households experience three or more "financial shocks" per year — unexpected expenses of $400 or more, hitting every four months with no savings to absorb them.

Income unpredictable. Expenses unpredictable. And we're surprised that the planning horizon is two weeks.

Bill Perkins can time-bucket his life because his variables are stable. His income is predictable (or, more accurately, his wealth makes income fluctuations irrelevant). His expenses are manageable. His crises are insured against. The terrain doesn't shift under his feet between turns. For the seventy-some million Americans whose conditions reshuffle every pay period, "what time bucket am I in?" is a question from another planet.

This is where we stop describing the problem and start building the ladder out of it: the planning horizon can be expanded. Not overnight. Not from two weeks to ten years in one inspiring leap. But incrementally, deliberately, one bracket at a time. And expand-

ing your planning horizon, even a little, is one of the highest-return investments you can make when you have nothing.

The Playbook

Forget Time Buckets. Build Time Brackets.

Here's the premise: you can't go from "surviving until Friday" to "five-year plan." The jump is too large, the cognitive load is too heavy, and every piece of advice that tells you to "think long-term" is asking you to do something your brain literally can't prioritize right now.

So don't.

One distinction first: planning and dreaming are not the same thing. Dreaming is imagining a future without constraints — keep doing it, on a separate piece of paper, because it keeps you connected to your own desires. Planning has numbers, dates, and a first step you can take this week. The playbook that follows is a planning tool. As your horizon expands, some dreams will slide into the planning column. That's the real time bucket — the moment you move something from 'someday' to 'here's how.'

Instead, expand in brackets. Your planning horizon is a muscle. You don't start with the 300-pound deadlift. You start with the bar.

I call this the **30-60-90 Framework**, and it's designed specifically for people whose current planning horizon is measured in days. It's not a budget. It's not a life plan. It's a planning *practice* — a way to gradually train your brain to look further ahead as your stability increases.

Bracket 1: The 30-Day View

Where you start: You're in survival mode. You're thinking about this week, maybe next week. Bills arrive and you react. If someone asked you right now, "What are all of your financial obligations for the next thirty days?" you'd probably be able to name the big ones — rent, car payment — but the full list, with dates and amounts? That's the stuff that ambushes you on a Tuesday afternoon when your phone buzzes with an autopay notification you forgot about.

What this actually looks like when you're starting from zero: It's not a budget. It's not a spreadsheet. It's the financial equivalent of turning the lights on in a room you've been navigating in the dark. You probably already know most of what's in the room — you've been bumping into it for months. The 30-day view just lets you see where everything is at the same time, so you can stop stubbing your toe on the electric bill every month. If you've never done this before, it will feel both obvious and strangely relieving. That's normal.

The goal: Get to the point where you know — not guess, *know* — what the next 30 days look like financially. No surprises that could have been predicted.

How to build it:

Step 1: The Bill Map. Get a piece of paper, the back of an envelope, a free note app on your phone — I don't care what. Write down every bill that's due in the next 30 days. The amount. The date. Whether it's flexible (negotiable due date, grace period) or fixed (eviction-triggering, service-shutoff level). This takes about twenty minutes and costs nothing.

What it gets you: the ability to see the whole month at once instead of getting ambushed by each bill as it arrives. This sounds small. It is not small. When you can see the whole battlefield, you make different decisions than when you're reacting to whatever just hit you. You might notice that your car insurance, your phone bill, and your electric bill are all due in the same week — and that you can call one of them to move the due date to the following week, smoothing out the cash flow crunch.

Step 2: The Pay Overlay. On the same piece of paper, mark your pay dates. Now you can see the gaps. Where are you getting paid *after* something is due? That's where the stress lives. That's the gap you need to manage, and now you can see it coming instead of experiencing it as a surprise every month.

Step 3: The One Thing. Ask yourself: *What is one thing I can do this month to be slightly better positioned next month?* Not "transform my life." Not "build a six-month emergency fund." One thing. Maybe it's calling your car insurance company and asking about a lower rate. Maybe it's signing up for a prescription discount program. Maybe it's putting $10 in an envelope and not touching it. One thing. The bar is on the ground. Pick it up.

Cost: Zero dollars. Twenty to thirty minutes.

What it gets you: The ability to see a month ahead. Reduced surprise. A slight reduction in the tunneling effect, because when you can see the threat coming, your brain doesn't have to stay in permanent crisis mode.

When it doesn't work: When your income is so volatile that even mapping the month doesn't produce useful predictions. If your hours change weekly and you genuinely can't estimate your next paycheck within $200, start with a two-week view instead of a thirty-day view. The principle is the same — you're expanding from where you are, not from where someone thinks you should be.

Bracket 2: The 60-Day View

Where you start: You've been doing the 30-day view for a while. You're no longer ambushed by bills. You've started to feel a slight — possibly unfamiliar — sense of control. Not comfort. Not security. Just the absence of constant surprise.

The goal: Start anticipating problems before they become crises. Move from reactive to *slightly* proactive.

How to build it:

Step 1: The Next Crisis Forecast. Ask yourself: *What is the next thing most likely to go wrong?* You already know the answer — the car, the lease renewal, the medical thing you've been ignoring. Write it down. Then write your top three most likely emergencies for the next sixty days. Not apocalyptic stuff. The realistic stuff that's happened before.

Step 2: The Pre-Response. For each scenario, write down what you'd *actually* do with the resources you *actually* have. Who would you call? What would you cut? Where would the money come from? Write it now, while you can think clearly, so that when the crisis hits you follow instructions instead of improvising under duress.

Step 3: The Small Goal. In addition to the crisis forecast, identify one achievable goal for the 60-day horizon. Not "get out of debt." Something like: "Pay $50 extra on the credit card with the highest interest rate." Or "Find out whether I qualify for the state health insurance program." Or "Open a savings account with $25 in it." Something concrete, with a specific number and a specific action. Something that, when you do it, you'll know you did it.

Cost: Zero dollars. Maybe an hour spread across a few sessions. Emotional energy: moderate. Acknowledging that crises are coming isn't fun. But you already knew they were coming. Writing it down doesn't make it more real — it makes you more ready.

What it gets you: A shift from reactive to proactive. The beginning of crisis resilience instead of crisis response. And something subtle but important: a sense of agency. Not control — you don't control the variables. But agency. The difference between things happening *to* you and things happening that *you've already planned for*.

When it doesn't work: When you're in such deep crisis that the 30-day view is still consuming all your bandwidth. Don't force the 60-day view. If you're still getting ambushed by next week, stay in Bracket 1. This is not a race. There's no deadline. The bracket system goes at your speed.

Bracket 3: The 90-Day View

Where you start: The 30-day map is routine. The 60-day crisis forecast has prevented at least one disaster (or at least reduced its impact). You're starting to feel something unusual: the faintest sense that you might be able to think about next quarter without having a panic attack.

The goal: For the first time, look at two possible futures simultaneously — the one where nothing goes wrong, and the one where something does. Plan for both.

How to build it:

Step 1: The Dual Track. Map two 90-day scenarios. *Track A (Stable):* nothing major goes wrong — where do you end up? A small savings balance, a debt paid off, the ability to say no to a terrible shift? *Track B (Disruption):* the most likely crisis from Bracket 2 hits — how far does it set you back? What does recovery look like?

The dual track turns the future from a vague anxiety into a corridor with a best case and a realistic worst case. Corridors are navigable. Vague anxiety is not.

Step 2: The Seasonal Scan. Many expenses are seasonal, and they demolish people who aren't expecting them. Look at the next 90 days and identify the predictable costs that aren't monthly bills: back-to-school expenses in August, holiday costs in November-December, car registration renewals, annual insurance premiums,

property tax if you own, the heating bill spike in winter, the cooling bill spike in summer. These aren't surprises. They happen every year. But if you're in short-horizon survival mode, they *feel* like surprises, because you only see them when they arrive.

List them. Put them on the calendar. And start — even if it's $5 a week — setting aside money for the ones you can see coming. Five dollars a week over twelve weeks is $60, which won't cover Christmas but will mean the difference between "I have nothing" and "I have a start."

Step 3: The Stability Audit. At 90 days, you have enough runway to ask a question that short-term survival doesn't allow: *What is keeping me in this cycle?*

Not in a self-blaming way. In a diagnostic way. Is it the interest on a debt that's eating your margin? Is it a commute that costs more than you realize? Is it a subscription or obligation you're maintaining out of inertia? Is it that your current job has a hard ceiling and no amount of optimization will change the underlying math?

This isn't "what am I doing wrong?" This is "what structural factor is the biggest drag on my trajectory?" Identify it. Put it on the 90-day plan. You might not solve it in 90 days. But you can start. You can make the first call, fill out the first application, have the first conversation. The 90-day view gives you permission to work on causes instead of just symptoms.

Cost: Still zero dollars. More cognitive investment. Probably some uncomfortable realizations. A notebook or note app is helpful at this stage — you're tracking enough variables that holding them all in your head is counterproductive.

What it gets you: The ability to think in quarters instead of weeks. The beginning of trajectory thinking — not just "will I survive this month?" but "where am I headed?" This is the bracket where planning starts to feel like planning instead of damage control.

When it doesn't work: When the disruption track keeps winning. If you keep getting knocked back to Bracket 1 by crises, the problem isn't your planning skills — it's the frequency of shocks. That's a structural issue, and the answer is either increasing income, decreasing exposure to shocks (which often means addressing the underlying cause — the unreliable car, the untreated health condition, the predatory lease), or both. The 90-day view will at least show you the pattern, even if it can't immediately break it.

The Calendar as a Financial Tool (The Simplest Thing Nobody Does)

One of the simplest and most underused tools for expanding your planning horizon is a calendar. Not a budgeting app. Not a spreadsheet. A calendar — physical or digital, whatever you'll actually look at.

Here's how to use it:

Mark your pay dates in one color. Mark your bill due dates in another color. Mark known upcoming expenses — the car registration, the school field trip fee, the dentist appointment — in a third color. Now look at the month. You can see where the money comes in, where it goes out, and where the collisions happen.

This takes about fifteen minutes to set up and about two minutes per week to maintain. It costs nothing. And it does something that no amount of mental math can accomplish: it externalizes the planning. Instead of carrying every financial obligation in your working memory — which, remember, is already taxed by the tunneling effect — you offload it to a tool that doesn't forget and doesn't panic.

I know someone who calls this "making the invisible visible." All those due dates and pay dates already exist. They're already going to happen. The calendar doesn't change reality — it just lets you see it all at once instead of one ambush at a time.

Pro tip: if your bills are clustered — like everything's due between the 1st and the 5th — call your service providers and ask to move the due dates. Most utility companies, insurance companies, and even some landlords will adjust the due date if you ask. The goal is to spread your obligations across the month so that no single week is a catastrophe. This is free. It takes a phone call. And it can be the difference between making it and not making it in a tight month.

When You Finally Can Plan (And Why It Feels Weird)

Here's something nobody warns you about: if you've been in survival mode for months or years, the moment you reach stability feels *wrong.*

I mean that literally. When you've been operating on a two-week horizon for long enough, your nervous system adapts to it. The constant vigilance becomes normal. The low-grade panic becomes background noise. And when the background noise stops — when

you've built enough of a cushion that you're not in immediate danger — the silence is disorienting.

Some people describe it as waiting for the other shoe to drop. Others describe it as a compulsive urge to spend the cushion — not because they want to, but because having money in reserve is so unfamiliar that it creates its own anxiety.

This is real. The psychological literature on chronic financial stress — including work by Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir — shows that the stress response doesn't immediately calibrate when the stressor is removed. If you reach a point of stability and you feel anxious or like you need to sabotage it: congratulations, you're normal. Your brain learned that stability was temporary. The recalibration takes time. Let it take time.

What to do when you get there:

First: Don't make any big decisions for 30 days. I knew a woman who spent eleven months clawing out of a debt spiral, and the week she finally had $800 in savings she almost signed up for a $600 online business course because the freedom from crisis felt so strange she needed to *do something* with it. She sat with the discomfort instead. By day thirty, she used the money to fix the brake pads she'd been ignoring. Sit with the stability. Let your nervous system catch up.

Second: Set the floor before you build the ceiling. Before you start planning experiences or life goals, make sure the basics are covered for the next 90 days. Rent is secure, bills are mapped, crisis forecast updated, small buffer in place. A ceiling without a floor is a collapse waiting to happen.

Third: Now — and only now — you can start to think about what you actually want. Maybe it's the vacation. Maybe it's the certification that gets you from $18/hour to $24. Maybe it's something that has nothing to do with money — signing your kid up for the travel team, taking a weekend off without guilt, buying a book that isn't about self-improvement. The point is that you're choosing it from stability, not reacting to it from crisis. That's new. Let it be new.

The Close

Bill Perkins wants you to divide your life into elegant five-year segments and fill each one with curated experiences. And honestly? I hope you get there someday. I hope you get to sit down with a glass of wine and a journal and think about whether your fifties should be the "learn Italian and buy a small boat" decade or the "finally write that novel" decade. I genuinely hope that for you.

But right now, your time buckets are 30 days, 60 days, and 90 days, and they're not filled with experiences — they're filled with bills, contingency plans, and the hard-won knowledge of what you'll do when the next thing breaks. And that's not a failure of imagination. That's a plan built for the life you actually have, not the one someone wrote a bestseller about.

The car, by the way — the one with the rattling that became a grinding? I eventually fixed it. Not with a time-bucketed savings plan. With a tax refund and a mechanic who let me pay in two installments. It took four months of turning the radio up, one maxed-out credit card, and a lot of parking-lot journal sessions that didn't look anything like the planning exercises in personal finance books.

But the next time a car made that noise, I knew what to do. I'd already written the crisis plan. I'd already identified the mechanic, the payment option, the fallback. The second time wasn't painless, but it was *planned*. And planned pain is a different animal than ambush pain. It's survivable in a way that surprises aren't.

Your time buckets don't have to be elegant. They just have to be yours. Start with 30 days. That's plenty. That's more than you had yesterday.

Next chapter: Perkins says to find your "peak" — the point where your earning power is highest. We'll talk about what happens when there is no peak, just a flat line going nowhere.

Chapter 8: Know Your Peak

Or: There Is No Peak When You Haven't Started Climbing

"You need to figure out when your earning power will peak so you can plan the rest of your life around it." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero

"My earning power peaked the day they gave me a quarter raise and took away my employee discount." — *Overheard at a Waffle House in Tuscaloosa*

The Hook

There's a graph in *Die With Zero* that's supposed to represent your lifetime earnings. It looks like a hill — a gentle upward slope through your twenties and thirties, a summit somewhere in your late forties or early fifties, then a dignified descent into retirement. It's a pretty graph. It looks like something you'd see in an intro economics textbook, right next to the supply-and-demand curves that also don't describe how anything actually works.

I stared at that graph for a long time once, sitting in the break room of a distribution warehouse where I was pulling orders for $13.50 an hour. I'd been pulling orders for three years. Before that, I'd stocked shelves. Before that, I'd worked a register. Across the table, a coworker named Darnell was eating a sandwich and watching

something on his phone. He'd been at the warehouse seven years — longer than me, same flat pay, same dead math. I'd come back to Darnell later. I was thirty-one years old, and my lifetime earnings graph didn't look like a hill. It looked like Nebraska — flat, endless, and hard to get excited about. If my earning potential had a "peak," it was the Christmas season when they offered overtime at time-and-a-half, and even that peak was less Everest and more speed bump. The idea that I needed to "identify my peak" was like telling me I needed to identify the tallest building in a parking lot.

The Inversion

Bill Perkins wants you to know your peak. It's one of his central ideas: figure out when you'll earn the most money in your life, then structure everything — spending, saving, experiences — around that inflection point. It's a concept that makes intuitive sense if your career looks like a career. If you went to college, got hired into a field, advanced through a series of increasingly impressive titles, and can reasonably project that at age fifty-two you'll be a Senior Vice President of Something pulling $280,000 a year before the slow, graceful decline into consulting and board seats.

The problem isn't that Perkins is wrong about peaks. For the people he's talking to — educated professionals with trajectory — the peak is real. The problem is that roughly half the American workforce doesn't have a trajectory. They have a flatline.

A "career arc" assumes a career. A career, by definition, has a slope. Each year you're worth more than the last. You accumulate skills, relationships, institutional knowledge, and leverage. You negotiate raises not from a position of desperation but from a position of scarcity — you have something they can't easily replace.

A job is not that. A job is a vending machine. You insert time, it dispenses money. Next year you might get a cost-of-living increase that doesn't keep up with actual cost-of-living increases. The year after that you might get the same thing, or you might get laid off because someone figured out how to do your job with software or cheaper labor. The relationship between you and your employer is not a partnership — it's a transaction. You show up, you trade hours for dollars, you go home. The price on the machine barely changes.

For those same 73 million hourly workers from the last chapter — many of them at or near the bottom of the pay scale — the "peak" concept is almost cruelly irrelevant. Their earning graph doesn't have a peak. It has a ceiling. And the ceiling is low, and it's getting lower relative to the cost of everything pressed up against it.

Here's what the flatline looks like in practice: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median hourly wage for food preparation and serving workers was $14.34 in 2023. For retail salespersons, it was $16.06. For home health and personal care aides, it was $15.88. These aren't starting wages — they're median wages. That means half the people doing these jobs earn less. A twenty-two-year-old cashier making $13 an hour and a forty-five-year-old cashier making $15 an hour haven't experienced a career arc. They've experienced inflation, maybe, grudgingly acknowledged by an employer. Over twenty-three years, that worker's real purchasing power may have actually declined.

So when Perkins tells you to "know your peak," and your response is a hollow laugh — good. You're paying attention. The question isn't when your earning power will peak. The question is how to build a trajectory in the first place, so that "peak" stops being a cruel joke and starts being something you can actually plan around.

That's what this chapter is about. Not knowing your peak. Building one.

The Reality

Let's start with the uncomfortable data, because the data is where optimism goes to get a reality check before it heads back out with more realistic expectations.

The Flat Line Is Real, and It's Structural

The Economic Policy Institute has tracked wage growth by income percentile for decades, and the picture is damning. Between 1979 and 2022, wages for the bottom 10% of earners grew by 9.0% — total, not annually. Adjusted for inflation, over forty-three years. That's not a typo. Meanwhile, wages for the top 5% grew by 63.2% over the same period. The people who already had career arcs saw their arcs get steeper. The people without arcs saw their flatlines get flatter in real terms.

Why? Several reasons, none of them mysterious, all of them systemic.

The decline of unions. In 1979, roughly 27% of American workers were union members. By 2023, that number was 10%, and in the private sector it was 6%. Unions didn't just negotiate wages — they created career structures. A union pipefitter had a defined progression: apprentice, journeyman, master. Each stage came with a pay increase, formalized training, and a credential that was portable across employers. When unions shrank, those structures evaporated for millions of workers, replaced by the employer's unilateral discretion on who gets a raise and when.

The fissuring of the workplace. David Weil's concept of the "fissured workplace" describes how large companies outsource and subcontract everything they can. The janitor who used to work for Kodak with Kodak benefits and a Kodak career ladder now works for a janitorial staffing company with no benefits and no ladder. The security guard, the cafeteria worker, the IT help desk person — all contracted out, all severed from the host company's internal promotion structure. You can't climb a ladder that's been removed and placed in a different building owned by a different company.

The skills trap. Hourly work often teaches you skills that are real and valuable — reliability, customer management, physical endurance, crisis problem-solving — but those skills aren't credentialed. They don't show up on a resume in a way that lets you monetize them in a different context. A decade of waitressing teaches you more about human psychology, multitasking, and grace under pressure than most MBA programs, but no one is going to pay you $80,000 a year for your ability to manage a nine-table section during a Friday dinner rush. The skills are real. The recognition system is broken.

The College Question: Broken But Still Standing

The college wage premium is real. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York puts the gap at about $24,000 per year between bachelor's and high school diploma holders. Over a career, that's serious money.

But here's what the "just go to college" crowd leaves out.

First: the debt. The average student loan debt for a bachelor's graduate was $29,400 in 2023 — and for students from low-income families, the burden is often higher relative to their resources while the completion rate is lower. Only about 50% of students from the bottom income quartile who start at a four-year institution finish

within six years. Many take on debt without getting the degree. They get the loan payments without the wage premium.

Second: the opportunity cost. If you're making $14 an hour working full-time, that's roughly $29,000 a year. Going to college full-time means giving up most of that income for four to six years. Even at a state school with financial aid, you're looking at potentially $100,000+ in combined lost wages and direct costs. That's not pocket change for someone who's already behind. For someone supporting a family on hourly wages, it might as well be a million.

Third: the degree premium is shrinking in certain fields and inflating in others. A bachelor's in business administration from a non-selective state school doesn't open the same doors it did in 1995. A bachelor's in hospitality management might get you the same hotel front desk job you could have gotten without it — just with $30,000 in debt bolted to your ankle. The premium is real on average, but averages lie to individuals all the time.

None of this means college is bad. For the right person, at the right price, with the right support, it's still one of the most reliable escalators in American life. But it's not the only escalator, and for a lot of people in the flatline economy, it's an escalator they can't reach, or one that deposits them right back where they started but now carrying a heavy backpack of debt.

The Missing Middle

Between "stay in your hourly job forever" and "get a four-year degree" is a vast, weirdly under-discussed landscape of credentials, certifications, apprenticeships, and skilled trades that can transform a flatline into an actual trajectory. This is the missing middle of the American career conversation, and it's where most of the practical leverage lives for people without capital, connections, or a trust fund.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that between 2022 and 2032, many of the fastest-growing occupations accessible without a four-year degree include wind turbine service technicians (projected growth of 45%), nurse practitioners (38% with appropriate pathway), solar photovoltaic installers (22%), and information security analysts (32% — accessible via certifications). The trades — plumbing, electrical, HVAC, welding — face a demographic crisis: the average age of a skilled tradesperson is north of fifty, retirements are accelerating, and not enough young people are entering the pipeline to replace them. That's a supply-and-demand problem, and for once, the working class is on the right side of it.

This is the territory where flatlines become slopes. Where a "job" can become a "career." Where "peak" stops being a punchline and starts being a planning concept.

The Benefits Cliff (When Earning More Costs You Everything)

Before we get to the playbook, I need to address something that most career-advice books ignore entirely: for millions of Americans with disabilities or chronic health conditions, the decision to earn more isn't a straightforward win. It can be a trap.

If you're receiving SSI (Supplemental Security Income) or SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance), your benefits come with an earnings ceiling. For SSI, every dollar you earn above $65/month reduces your benefit by 50 cents. For SSDI, earning above the "substantial gainful activity" threshold — $1,550/month in 2024 — can trigger a review that eliminates your benefits entirely. And the benefit you can least afford to lose isn't the cash. It's the Medicaid or Medicare coverage tied to it. A medication that costs $1,200/month, a wheelchair that costs $4,000, regular specialist visits — these aren't optional expenses. They're what keeps you alive and functional. Earning $1,800/month at a new job while losing $1,500/month in medical coverage isn't a raise. It's a catastrophe.

This is the benefits cliff, and it's one of the cruelest design failures in American social policy. It punishes exactly the behavior it claims to encourage — working, earning, building independence — by yanking the safety net the moment you reach for the next rung.

If this is your situation, the playbook below still applies, but the math is different. You need to know your specific cliff: what you can earn before benefits reduce, what Medicaid buy-in programs your state offers (many states let you keep Medicaid while working — look up "Medicaid Buy-In for Working People with Disabilities" or call 211), and whether SSDI's Trial Work Period or Ticket to Work program lets you test employment without immediate benefit loss. Your state's vocational rehabilitation office (every state has one; find yours at rsa.ed.gov) provides free career counseling designed around these constraints. Use them. They exist for exactly this.

The same logic applies if you're a full-time caregiver — for a child with disabilities, an aging parent, a sick partner. Your "available hours" for credential stacking or career building may be close to zero, and no amount of motivational framing changes that. The playbook below is built for people who have some hours to invest. If you don't

have those hours right now, that's not a character failure. It's a resource constraint, and it deserves to be named as one.

Remember Darnell — the guy across the break room table, seven years at the warehouse, same flat pay? His lifetime earnings graph was a straight line going nowhere, and he knew it. What he didn't know yet was that the flatline wasn't a life sentence. It was the starting point for a staircase he hadn't built yet.

Let's build the playbook.

The Playbook

Everything in this section follows a simple framework. For each path, I'll tell you: **what it costs, what it gets you, how long it takes, and when it doesn't work.** That last part matters. I'm not here to sell you a dream with the fine print in six-point font. Every path has failure modes. You deserve to know what they are before you spend money and time you can't afford to waste.

Start Here: The Five-Factor Test

Every credential, certification, and career move in this chapter can be evaluated using the same five questions:

1. **Cost:** What's the total out-of-pocket? Can you pay as you go, or do you need a lump sum? Is financing available that isn't predatory?
2. **Time:** How long until you're earning more? Can you do it while working your current job? Time is money, but time is also the thing you already don't have enough of.
3. **Income Delta:** What's the realistic difference between what you make now and what you'll make after? Not the top-of-the-range number from the certification program's marketing materials — the median. If the delta is less than $5,000/year, think hard about whether it's worth the investment.
4. **Stability:** Is the new job/field stable? Growing? Recession-resistant? A credential in a declining field is a depreciating asset. Check the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook (it's free, it's online, and it's one of the most useful government resources that nobody outside of career counselors knows about — bls.gov/ooh).

5. **Scalability:** Does this credential lead to the next thing? Can you build on it? A dead-end credential is better than no credential, but a stackable credential is better than both.

If a path scores well on at least four of these five factors, it's worth serious consideration. If it only scores well on one or two, keep looking. Keep this test in your head as you read the strategies that follow — I've designed each one to pass it, but your specific situation may shift the math.

Not Sure Where to Start? Start Here.

There are five strategies below, and you don't need to read all of them. Find yourself in this list and skip to the one that fits:

- **You have no credentials and no clear direction.** Start with **Strategy 1: Credential Stacking.** It's the broadest on-ramp, and it's designed to get you from zero to a first foothold.
- **You're good with your hands, not allergic to physical work, and want something that pays well without a degree.** Go to **Strategy 2: Trades.**
- **You already have a stable job but the pay has flatlined, and you want a quick credential to unlock a side door.** Go to **Strategy 3: Side-Door Credentials.**
- **You have skills but no network — nobody's calling you back because nobody knows you exist.** Go to **Strategy 4: The Network Problem.**
- **You've already made a move or two but want to understand why it matters over time.** Read **Strategy 5: The Compounding Effect** — it's the math that makes all the other strategies worth doing.
- **If a disability or caregiving responsibility limits these paths,** the framework has limits — not you. Check your state's vocational rehabilitation program (rsa.ed.gov or call 211) for free career counseling, training, and job placement designed around those constraints.

Strategy 1: Credential Stacking (The Ladder Strategy)

The single most powerful concept in building a career trajectory from hourly work is **credential stacking** — using one credential to get a slightly better job, then using that job's income (and schedule, and

connections) to get the next credential, which gets you the next job, which funds the next credential. Each rung pays for the next one. That's the engine.

The classic example is in healthcare:

- **Step 1: Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)**
  - **Cost:** $500-$1,500 (many states have free or subsidized programs; some nursing homes will pay for your training in exchange for a work commitment)
  - **Time:** 4-8 weeks
  - **Gets you:** Entry-level healthcare work at $15-$19/hour ($31,000-$40,000/year). More importantly, it gets you inside a hospital or care facility, where you can see the full career ladder up close and start building relationships with nurses and administrators.
  - **When it doesn't work:** CNA work is physically and emotionally grueling. The burnout rate is high. If you have a bad back, elderly care might not be sustainable. And the pay ceiling for CNA alone is low — this only works if you treat it as a rung, not a destination.
  - **A note on what this pay means:** A CNA making $16/hour is doing backbreaking, essential work and deserves more than $33,000 a year, full stop. The fact that this is a *step up* from food service or retail wages is a policy indictment, not a compliment. I'm telling you the ladder exists. I'm not telling you the bottom rungs are set at the right height.
- **Step 2: Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)**
  - **Cost:** $4,000-$15,000 (community college or vocational program; financial aid applies)
  - **Time:** 12-18 months
  - **Gets you:** $25-$28/hour ($48,000-$55,000/year) in most markets. Better shifts, more autonomy, and — critically — employer tuition assistance programs become available for the next step.
  - **When it doesn't work:** LPN programs have prerequisites (usually CNA experience helps, plus basic anatomy and math). Clinicals require scheduling flexibility that's hard if you're a single parent. Some states are phasing out LPN roles in certain settings.

- **Step 3: Registered Nurse (RN) via ADN (Associate Degree in Nursing)**
  - **Cost:** $6,000-$20,000 at a community college (minus any employer tuition reimbursement you've earned as an LPN)
  - **Time:** 2 years (part-time options available at some schools)
  - **Gets you:** $37-$45/hour ($75,000-$95,000/year) in most markets, with significant overtime and shift differential opportunities. Travel nursing contracts can push this much higher. And here's the kicker: you now have a career with a real peak. An RN at age fifty with experience in a specialty is a different economic creature than a CNA at age twenty-five.

Total time from hourly worker to RN: roughly 4-6 years. Total out-of-pocket cost: potentially under $15,000 if you're strategic about free CNA programs and employer tuition assistance. Income jump: from ~$29,000/year to ~$80,000+/year. That's not a flatline anymore. That's an arc.

I won't pretend that arc is easy to climb. Studying for a certification after a ten-hour shift while your kids need dinner and the dishes aren't done and you're behind on rent — that requires a kind of willpower that comfortable people can't imagine and shouldn't have to lecture anyone about. The ladder exists. The climb is real work.

The same ladder logic applies in tech:

- **CompTIA A+** ($500-$800 for study materials and exam fees, self-study, 2-4 months) gets you a help desk job at $35,000-$45,000.
- **CompTIA Network+** or **Security+** ($300-$500 more, another 2-4 months of study) moves you to a junior systems administrator or SOC analyst role at $50,000-$65,000.
- **AWS Cloud Practitioner → Solutions Architect** ($300-$600 in exam fees, 3-6 months study) opens the door to cloud engineering at $80,000-$120,000+.

Total cost: under $2,000. Total time: 2-3 years of stacking while working. Income trajectory: $14/hour to $50+/hour. Each rung funds the next.

Critical note: The tech ladder requires self-study discipline and, increasingly, home lab experience or project portfolios. Having a reliable computer and internet access is a prerequisite, which is itself a barrier for some. Public libraries with free WiFi and computer

access are the patch for this, and they work, but let's not pretend it's the same as having a dedicated home office.

Strategy 2: Trades — The Overlooked Gold Mine

I need to be blunt about something: the skilled trades are, right now, one of the best career trajectories available to someone without a degree and without capital. And they're overlooked for reasons that are almost entirely about class snobbery.

There's a cultural narrative — absorbed by parents, guidance counselors, and society at large — that "good" careers happen in offices and "fallback" careers happen in work boots. This narrative is wrong, and it's expensive. A master electrician in a major metro area makes $80,000-$100,000+. A journeyman plumber clears $60,000-$80,000 and is essentially recession-proof, because pipes don't stop breaking during economic downturns. An experienced welder specializing in underwater or pipeline work can make $100,000+. These are not fallback careers. These are careers with arcs, peaks, and the kind of job security that would make a middle manager weep with envy.

Here's how the trades path works:

- **HVAC Technician**
  - **Cost:** $1,500-$3,000 for certification programs (trade schools, community colleges); many HVAC companies offer paid apprenticeships
  - **Time:** 6-12 months for entry-level certification, 3-4 years for full journeyman status through apprenticeship
  - **Gets you:** Entry level at $18-$22/hour, journeyman at $25-$35/hour, master/business owner potentially much more. Median pay nationally is around $48,000, but experienced techs in high-demand markets regularly clear $70,000+.
  - **When it doesn't work:** The work is physical — crawl spaces, rooftops in August, attics in July. If you're claustrophobic or heat-sensitive, this isn't your path. The apprenticeship years are lean.
- **Welding Certification**
  - **Cost:** $2,000-$5,000 for a welding program (many community colleges offer these)

  - **Time:** 6-9 months for basic certification; ongoing specialization afterward
  - **Gets you:** Entry level at $18-$22/hour. Specialized welders (TIG, underwater, pipeline) earn $30-$50+/hour. The median is around $44,000, but the ceiling is high if you specialize and are willing to travel.
  - **When it doesn't work:** Hard on the body — eyes, lungs, joints. Safety gear helps but doesn't eliminate the toll. Some work is project-based and cyclical.
- **Commercial Driver's License (CDL)**
  - **Cost:** $3,000-$7,000 for CDL school (some trucking companies will pay for training in exchange for a 1-2 year driving commitment)
  - **Time:** 3-6 weeks for training and licensing
  - **Gets you:** Over-the-road trucking starts at $45,000-$55,000 and can reach $70,000-$80,000+ with experience. Local and specialized driving (hazmat, tanker) pays more. Owner-operators can earn six figures, though with significant expenses and risk.
  - **When it doesn't work:** Long-haul trucking destroys relationships and health — weeks away from home, terrible food, sedentary hours. Local driving is better for life but pays less. The company-paid training commitment can be a raw deal; read the contract carefully, because some are essentially indentured servitude with penalties for early departure.

Strategy 3: The Side-Door Credentials

Not every credential requires months of training. Some are quick, cheap, and open specific doors.

- **Real Estate License**
  - **Cost:** $300-$1,000 (course fees plus exam fees, varies by state)
  - **Time:** 2-3 months of coursework (often available online)
  - **Gets you:** The ability to earn commission on real estate transactions. The median real estate agent earns about $49,000, but the distribution is wildly bimodal — a lot of agents earn very little, and a smaller number earn a lot.

It's one of the few fields where your income is genuinely uncapped without needing a degree.
  - **When it doesn't work:** Real estate is commission-only, which means you need savings to survive the ramp-up period (3-6 months of near-zero income is common for new agents). You also need a car, a phone, and the ability to work evenings and weekends. And the market is cyclical — a real estate license obtained in 2006 wasn't worth much in 2008. This path rewards hustle and social skills but punishes anyone who can't absorb financial volatility.
- **Phlebotomy Certification**
  - **Cost:** $700-$1,500
  - **Time:** 2-4 months
  - **Gets you:** $35,000-$42,000/year to start. It's healthcare-adjacent, which means it can be a stepping stone to higher-paying healthcare credentials (medical lab tech, nursing). And every hospital, clinic, and blood bank needs phlebotomists.
  - **When it doesn't work:** The pay ceiling for phlebotomy alone is modest. If you stop here, you're back to the flat-line problem within a few years. It's a great first rung but a disappointing last one.
- **Personal Training Certification (NASM, ACE, ISSA)**
  - **Cost:** $500-$800
  - **Time:** 2-4 months of self-study
  - **Gets you:** $20-$40/hour at a gym, potentially $60-$100+/hour if you build a private client base. It's one of the few credentials where the earning potential scales with your salesmanship rather than your seniority.
  - **When it doesn't work:** Gym jobs often start part-time with no benefits. Building a private client base requires marketing skills and social capital. Income is unstable — clients ghost, seasons change, pandemics happen. But as a side credential on top of a stable job, it can be a genuine income multiplier.

Strategy 4: The Network Problem (and How to Solve It at $0)

Here's a truth that career advice books rarely cop to: most jobs — especially the good ones — are filled through networks. People hire people they know, or people who are vouched for by people they know. A 2022 survey by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that roughly 50-70% of jobs (depending on the study and industry) are filled through networking or referrals.

If you grew up working class, your network is probably other working-class people. Which is great for solidarity and terrible for career advancement. Your uncle doesn't know anyone at the tech company. Your cousin's friend doesn't golf with the HVAC business owner who's hiring.

This is a real barrier, and pretending otherwise is dishonest. But it's not insurmountable. Here's how to build a professional network from scratch, at zero or near-zero cost:

Temp agencies and staffing firms. I know, I know. Temp agencies are the soggy sandwich of the employment world. But they serve a function that's genuinely useful for network-building: they get you inside companies you'd never otherwise access. A temp assignment at a corporate office, a hospital, or a construction company puts you in physical proximity to people who make hiring decisions. Do your job well, be pleasant and reliable, and you've just done a three-month job interview that no resume could replicate. Many temp-to-perm conversions happen this way. The agency takes a cut, the arrangement is imperfect, but the access is real.

LinkedIn at $0. LinkedIn is free to create and free to use in its basic form. The fact that it feels like a social media platform for people who describe themselves as "thought leaders" is unfortunate but not disqualifying. Here's the tactical play: create a profile (it doesn't need to be fancy), connect with every coworker and former coworker you can find, and start following companies and people in the field you're trying to enter. When you earn a certification, post about it — not in a cringe "I'm blessed" way, but in a "just passed my CompTIA A+" way. The algorithm is surprisingly generous to people posting career milestones. Recruiters use LinkedIn as a primary sourcing tool. Being findable is half the battle.

Informational interviews. This phrase sounds fake. It sounds like something a career counselor made up to justify their salary. But

it works, and here's why: most people enjoy talking about themselves and their work. If you send a short, respectful message to someone in a field you're interested in — via LinkedIn, via email, via any channel — asking if they'd be willing to spend fifteen minutes telling you about their job, a surprising number of people will say yes. You're not asking for a job. You're asking for information. The social pressure is low, and the ego gratification is high. In that conversation, you learn what credentials actually matter (versus which ones are resume padding), what the real day-to-day looks like, and — critically — you become a real person in their mental Rolodex. When a position opens up three months later, you're the person they remember.

Community organizations and trade associations. Most trades have local chapters of national organizations — IBEW for electricians, UA for plumbers and pipefitters, associated builders and contractors chapters. Showing up to a meeting or an open house costs nothing and puts you in a room with people who are hiring or who know people who are hiring. Same goes for local workforce development boards, which exist in nearly every county in America and whose entire job is to connect people to training and employment. These organizations are shockingly underutilized, mostly because people don't know they exist.

Strategy 5: The Compounding Effect — Why Even Small Raises Matter

Let's do some math that might change how you think about career moves.

Say you're making $15/hour right now. That's $31,200/year at full-time.

You invest $2,000 and three months in a credential that gets you a job paying $18/hour. That's $37,440/year — a difference of $6,240/year.

Seems decent but not life-changing, right?

Now extend it. Over ten years, that $3/hour raise — assuming nothing else changes — is $62,400 in additional earnings. That's not nothing. That's a down payment on a house in many markets.

But things do change, because $18/hour jobs tend to come with better advancement opportunities than $15/hour jobs. If that $18/hour job has its own internal ladder — raises, promotions, specialized roles — and you average just a dollar-an-hour raise

each year (modest, achievable), after ten years you're at $28/hour, or $58,240/year. Compare that to the flatline scenario where you stayed at $15/hour — maybe getting cost-of-living bumps to $17/hour over the same period — and you're looking at a cumulative difference of over $150,000 in earnings across that decade.

That's the compounding effect. It's the same math that makes rich people richer, except applied to labor instead of capital. A career with a slope — even a gentle slope — dramatically outperforms a career with a flatline over time. The first credential doesn't just increase your income; it changes the rate at which your income can grow.

This is what Perkins means by "knowing your peak," translated into a language that's actually useful for people starting from the bottom. You're not identifying a predetermined summit. You're building a slope. And the steeper you can make that slope in the early years — through credential stacking, trades, strategic moves — the higher your eventual peak will be.

The Close

Back to that break room. Darnell — same warehouse, seven years to my three, same flat pay — looked over my shoulder at Perkins' graph and said, "What's that?"

"It's supposed to be your lifetime earnings," I said.

He squinted. "Looks like a hill I can't get to."

"It's an arc. You start low, peak in the middle, decline at the end."

Darnell considered this. He'd been at the warehouse for seven years, making $14.75 an hour. "Where's the version that's just a straight line going nowhere?" he asked. "Because that's mine."

Fair enough. But here's the thing about Darnell — he didn't stay on that flatline. Eight months after that conversation, he got his CDL through a company-sponsored program. He hated the long-haul routes, so he moved to local delivery. Then he got his hazmat endorsement. Last I heard, he was making $68,000 a year and studying for his HVAC certification because his brother-in-law's company was hiring and the work was easier on his knees.

Darnell's lifetime earnings graph still doesn't look like Perkins' elegant hill. It looks more like a staircase — flat stretches punctuated

by sudden jumps. A step function, not a smooth curve. But a staircase goes up. And going up, however inelegantly, beats the hell out of standing still.

And none of this is fair — the fact that a person needs to spend years and thousands of dollars climbing from poverty to not-poverty while someone else starts halfway up the ladder is a structural obscenity. The ladder exists and can be climbed, and the starting positions are indefensible. Both things.

You don't need to know your peak. You need to build your next step. The peak will introduce itself when it's ready. And if it never looks like the pretty graph in the rich guy's book — well, it doesn't need to. It just needs to be higher than where you started.

That's the whole game.

The BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook is available free at bls.gov/ooh. If you're evaluating any career move mentioned in this chapter, start there. It's not exciting reading, but neither is being broke forever.

Chapter 9: "Spend on What Matters" — Everything Matters When You Can't Afford Any of It

> "Spend your money on the things that matter most to you — your values should drive your spending decisions." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
>
> "My values are food, shelter, and not dying. In that order. Sometimes I switch the first two around." — *A woman in a financial literacy workshop, responding to a prompt about "aligning spending with values"*

The Hook

Here's a fun exercise from the world of intentional spending. Grab a pen and a notebook — or open your favorite journaling app, if you're that kind of person — and write down your top five values. Go ahead. Love? Travel? Education? Creativity? Adventure? Great. Now look at your last month's bank statement and ask yourself: *Does my spending reflect my values?*

If you make $85,000 a year, this exercise might produce a useful epiphany. Maybe you'll realize you're spending $340 a month on streaming services and subscription boxes when what you really value is quality time with your kids. Maybe you'll cancel Hulu and book a camping trip. Maybe you'll cry a single, tasteful tear of self-actualization. Good for you.

If you make $26,000 a year, this exercise produces a different kind of revelation: your top five values are rent, electricity, gas, food, and the minimum payment on the credit card that covered last month's car repair. Your spending already reflects your values perfectly. Your values are *continuing to exist*. There's no misalignment to correct because there's no discretionary spending to redirect. You are, in the most literal sense possible, already spending on what matters. Everything matters. That's the whole problem.

The Inversion

Bill Perkins' advice to "spend on what matters" is one of those ideas that sounds universal but is actually wearing a very specific income bracket like a disguise. The premise is straightforward: most people spend mindlessly, scattering money across things that don't align with their deeper values, and they'd be happier if they got intentional about it. Audit your spending, identify what you truly care about, redirect your dollars toward those things, and cut the rest. This isn't about asking what sparks joy. It's about asking what keeps the lights on and what changes the trajectory.

And look, the logic is sound — for people who have the luxury of misaligned spending. If you're making $80K and blowing $15,000 a year on things you don't actually care about, yeah, you should probably redirect that money. You have slack in the system. You have dollars that are wandering around without a purpose, and Perkins is right that those dollars could be doing something better.

But "values-based spending" has a prerequisite that nobody mentions: you need discretionary income to have a values conversation. You need dollars that aren't already spoken for by the bare mechanics of survival. When 100% of your money is going to needs — not wants, not guilty pleasures, not mindless Amazon orders, but *actual survival needs* — there's nothing left to optimize. You can't "align your spending with your values" because your spending is already aligned with the most fundamental value of all: staying alive. Telling someone whose entire budget is survival spending to "spend on what matters" is like telling someone who's rationing water in a desert to "stay hydrated." Thanks. Noted.

Perkins' "spend on what matters" advice lives at the top of Maslow's pyramid — the self-actualization layer, the one you can't access until the survival layers underneath are handled (Chapter 10 builds our own version of the hierarchy in detail). It's about directing your resources toward the things that give your life meaning and fulfillment. And that's a beautiful idea, sincerely. But it assumes you've already handled the bottom four layers. It assumes the food is covered, the housing is stable, the safety is established, the relationships are maintained, and now you have this surplus of resources to aim at your deepest values.

For tens of millions of Americans, the bottom two layers of Maslow's pyramid consume every available dollar and then some. They're not misaligning their spending — they're prioritizing it. And prioritizing under scarcity is a fundamentally different activity than optimizing with surplus. Optimization asks: "What's the best use of this dollar?" Scarcity asks: "Which fire do I put out first?" One is a strategy. The other is an emergency.

So let's talk about what spending looks like when everything is urgent. Because if you can't afford to spend on "what matters" in the Perkins sense, you can at least get strategic about spending on what matters in the *survival* sense — and buried inside that allocation, if you're very careful and a little bit lucky, there might be one or two expenditures that don't just keep you alive but actually change the trajectory.

The Reality

The Math of Having No Money Left

Let's build a real budget at the income level we've been talking about throughout this book. Take someone earning $14 an hour, full-time, 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year. That's $29,120 gross. After federal income tax, Social Security, and Medicare — and assuming a standard deduction, no dependents, and no state income tax because we're being generous — take-home is roughly $25,000 to $26,000 a year. Call it $2,150 a month.

Now spend it:

Category	Monthly Cost	Notes
Rent	$950	Studio or shared apartment in a mid-tier city. National median is higher.
Utilities	$130	Electric, water, gas. Internet if you're lucky.
Food	$300	USDA "thrifty" plan for one adult. That's $2.50 per meal.
Transportation	$350	Car payment + insurance + gas. Or transit pass + Uber for the gaps.
Phone	$50	Prepaid plan. You need this for work.
Health insurance	$0-$150	Medicaid if you qualify. Marketplace plan if you don't and your employer doesn't cover it.
Minimum debt payments	$100	Credit card, medical bill, student loan — pick your poison.

Category	Monthly Cost	Notes
Everything else	$120	Toiletries, cleaning supplies, work clothes, laundry, the thing you forgot (birthday present, parking ticket, copay).

Total: $2,000-$2,150

That's it. That's the whole paycheck. If you've been following along with a calculator, you'll notice there's somewhere between zero and $150 left over. And that's on a *good* month — a month where nothing breaks, nobody gets sick, no unexpected bill arrives, and every payment hits on the right day. The months where something does go wrong — and something always goes wrong — push you into the negative, and the negative has its own costs: overdraft fees, late fees, interest charges, the whole poverty penalty we talked about in the introduction.

Now look at that budget and tell me where the "values-based spending" is supposed to go. Where's the line item for "experiences"? For "personal growth"? For "the things that make life worth living"? There isn't one. Every single dollar is performing a survival function. The budget isn't misaligned with your values — it's misaligned with your *existence as a person who has hopes and interests and dreams.* But those aren't line items. Those are luxuries.

The Forced Short-Termism Trap

The bandwidth tax from Chapter 1 is at work here too: the people who most need to think strategically about their spending are the least equipped to do so, because scarcity consumes the cognitive bandwidth that strategic thinking requires. The Perkins framework asks you to take a bird's-eye view of your values and realign. That bird's-eye view is a cognitive luxury. When you're in survival mode,

you have a ground-level view of whatever fire is closest, and the smoke is in your eyes.

When Everything Is Urgent, Nothing Is Strategic

Every month, you're standing in a financial emergency room with a dozen patients — your rent, your electric bill, your car insurance, that medical bill in collections, the groceries, the gas — and you're triaging. Who gets paid in full? Who gets a partial payment? Who gets ignored this month with a prayer that the consequences won't be fatal? This isn't budgeting. This is battlefield medicine for your checking account.

The problem is that when you're allocating like this month after month, year after year, you never get to shift from emergency mode to strategic mode. You never get to ask, "What spending would change my life?" because you're too busy asking, "What spending keeps me alive until Friday?" And that permanent emergency state is exactly what keeps you stuck. You can't invest in the future because the present is consuming every resource you have.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey confirms this pattern. Households in the lowest income quintile — those making roughly $15,000 or less — spend over 82% of their income on the three basics: housing, food, and transportation. The next quintile, those making around $15,000 to $30,000, still spend about 70% on the same three categories. For comparison, the top quintile spends about 48% of income on those basics, leaving 52% for everything else — savings, investments, education, entertainment, the "values-based spending" that Perkins is talking about.

When you're in the bottom two quintiles, the room for strategic spending isn't slim — it's essentially zero. The spending pie is consumed by survival, and any attempt to redirect dollars toward trajectory-changing expenditures means taking from one survival category to fund another. You're robbing Peter to pay Paul, and Paul is also you.

The Playbook

So here's where we stop describing the problem and start working it. Because even inside the triage, even when every dollar is a sur-

vival dollar, there are moves to make. They're not comfortable moves. They require a kind of strategic ruthlessness that "values-based spending" advice never prepares you for. But they work — or at least, they can work — and that's more than most financial advice offers at this income level.

The Barrier You Have to Name First: Guilt

Before we get to the framework, we need to talk about the invisible tax on every spending decision you make when you're broke: guilt.

When you're living on the edge, every dollar you spend on yourself — even strategically, even on something your own spreadsheet says will pay for itself in three months — feels wrong. The voice in your head says: *You can't afford that. You should be saving. You should be paying down debt. You should be putting this toward rent.*

Some of that voice is practical wisdom. But most of it is internalized judgment — years of messages that say any spending by a broke person that isn't pure survival is proof you deserve your poverty.

That voice is wrong, and it's expensive. Because the guilt doesn't just make you feel bad — it prevents you from making strategic investments in yourself. It keeps you in permanent triage by making trajectory spending feel morally impossible. It says: you haven't earned the right to spend on your future because you can barely afford your present. And as long as you believe that, you stay stuck.

Here's the reframe that matters for everything that follows: *some spending is an investment in future survival, not a betrayal of present survival.* Buying a certification that raises your income by $8,000 a year isn't treating yourself. Getting a reliable car that ends the cycle of breakdowns isn't a luxury purchase. These are tactical decisions with measurable returns. You don't have to enjoy spending the money. But you have to be willing to do it, because staying in permanent triage forever is the most expensive decision of all.

Now, with that on the table — let's build the framework.

The Triage Spending Framework

Before you can spend strategically, you need to categorize ruthlessly. Here are the four tiers, in order of priority:

Category 1: Survival — Keeps You Alive and Housed

This is rent, food, utilities, and essential medication. These are non-negotiable in the sense that failing to pay them produces immediate, potentially catastrophic consequences. Eviction. Hunger. Hypothermia. Medical crisis. You don't "optimize" Category 1 — you cover it. If you can't cover it, you're in crisis mode, and the playbook for crisis mode is different (see Chapter 4 and Appendix A).

One important note: "survival" has a precise definition here. It doesn't mean "everything that feels essential." Your phone might feel essential — and it is, but it's Category 2, not Category 1, because going without a phone for a week won't kill you. It might cost you a job, which makes it urgent and important, but it's a different kind of urgent than not eating. The distinction matters because when you're triaging, you need to know which bills can slide for a week and which ones can't. Rent can't slide. Electricity usually gets a grace period. Food is non-negotiable. Medication depends on what it is — insulin is Category 1, allergy medicine is Category 2.

What it costs: For most people in the income range we're discussing, Category 1 consumes 55-70% of take-home pay.

When it breaks down: When rent alone exceeds 50% of your income, you're in a structural crisis that no amount of triage can fix. The answer isn't better spending — it's more income or lower housing costs, both of which require Category 3 interventions.

Category 2: Infrastructure — Keeps You Earning

This is your transportation, your phone, your work clothes, your childcare if you have kids. These are the things that don't keep you alive directly but keep the income flowing. If your car breaks down and you can't get to work, the car problem becomes a food and rent problem within two weeks. If your phone gets cut off and you miss the call from the staffing agency, the phone problem becomes everything.

Category 2 is where most people make their costliest mistakes — not by overspending, but by underspending. Deferring a $400 car repair until it becomes a $1,800 engine replacement. Dropping to the cheapest phone plan and losing the data you need to pick up gig shifts. Sending your kid to the cheapest childcare option and then losing the job when that option falls through. Infrastructure spending feels optional until it collapses, and then it's the most expensive thing you never paid for.

What it costs: 20-30% of take-home pay.

When it breaks down: When every infrastructure cost gets deferred for Category 1. The collapse is when, not if.

Category 3: Trajectory — Moves You Forward

This is the category that barely exists in most broke people's budgets, and it's the one that matters most for escaping the cycle. Trajectory spending is money spent on things that don't keep you alive or earning *right now* but change the slope of your income curve. A certification that qualifies you for a higher-paying job. A reliable car that ends the repair cycle. A move to a lower-cost area. A course that teaches you a marketable skill.

Category 3 is where the "counterintuitive spending" lives — the idea that sometimes the most strategic thing you can do with money you don't have is spend it on something that changes your future earnings. We'll break this down in detail below, because it's the most important part of this chapter and the most dangerous to get wrong.

What it costs: Anywhere from $200 to $8,000, depending on the intervention.

When it breaks down: When you spend on Category 3 at the expense of Category 1 and end up evicted. Trajectory spending only works if your survival spending is covered. Trying to pay for a coding bootcamp while you're behind on rent isn't strategic — it's denial wearing ambition's clothes.

Category 4: Everything Else — Rationed, Not Eliminated

This is everything that isn't survival, infrastructure, or trajectory. Entertainment. Hobbies. Non-essential clothing. Dining out. Decorating your apartment. The things that make life feel like a life rather than an endurance test.

Here's the honest version: Category 4 gets the smallest slice, but it has to get *a* slice. Not because the math says so — the math says redirect everything to Categories 1-3. Because you're a human being, not a spreadsheet, and a person running on pure austerity eventually stops running.

The guilt around this is enormous and worth naming. When you're broke, spending $12 on a movie ticket feels like a moral failure. Buying a $5 coffee feels like you're funding your own poverty. That guilt is mostly unwarranted — $12 and $5 are not why you're broke. The question isn't whether you deserve the coffee. You do. The question is how much Category 4 spending you can absorb this

specific month without pulling from Categories 1-3. That number might be $20. It might be $5. Some months it's zero, and that's okay as long as zero doesn't become permanent.

What it costs: Whatever you give it — but give it something.

When it breaks down: When it crowds out Category 3 spending that would change your trajectory. But also: when you deny yourself Category 4 so aggressively that your mental health collapses and you lose the ability to maintain Categories 1-3. Austerity has a failure point. A $12 movie that keeps you sane is a better investment than a savings account that drives you to a breakdown. The goal is rationing, not deprivation.

High-Leverage Expenditures: The Counterintuitive Case for Spending Money You Barely Have

Now we get to the hard part. Because the triage framework is useful, but the real question is: how do you ever get out of permanent triage? The answer, when it exists, usually involves Category 3 spending — specific, targeted expenditures that change your earning trajectory. Let's look at the big ones.

1. The Reliable Car ($5,000-$8,000 vs. the $2,000 Money Pit)

You've got a 2007 Chevy Cobalt with 185,000 miles. You paid $2,200 for it. In the last twelve months, you've spent $2,800 on repairs — alternator, brakes, radiator hose, tires, oxygen sensor, and a transmission issue that cost $1,060 and a prayer. That's $5,000 total cost of ownership for a car that might not survive another year.

Now consider: a 2015 Civic or Corolla with 90,000 miles from a private seller goes for $7,000-$9,000. With reasonable maintenance, that car gives you 4-5 years of reliable transportation at $500-$800/year.

Here's the math:

The $2,200 Cobalt	The $7,500 Civic
Purchase price	$2,200	$7,500

	The $2,200 Cobalt	The $7,500 Civic
Year 1 repairs/maintenance	$2,800	$600
Year 2 repairs/maintenance	$3,200 (estimated, escalating)	$700
Year 3	Probably dead. Buy another $2,000 car.	$800
3-year total	$8,200+ (two cars)	$9,600 (one car)
Missed work from breakdowns	3-5 days/year ($400-$700/year)	~0 days
Stress level	Constant	Manageable
Reliability for gig work	Disqualifying	Qualifying

Over three years, the "cheap" car costs almost the same in raw dollars and more when you factor in missed work and the cognitive bandwidth consumed by constant automotive anxiety. The expensive option is the cheap option. But it requires capital you don't have, which means you need to save for it or finance it intelligently (see the debt section below).

When this doesn't work: When you finance the better car at a 19% APR from a buy-here-pay-here lot and end up paying $12,000 for that $7,500 car. When you stretch to a car you can't actually afford and the payment consumes your Category 1 budget. When you live in a city with good public transit and don't need a car at all. Context matters. The principle is "buy reliability," not "buy a car."

2. The Certification (The Math of Whether You Can Afford It)

Chapter 8 covers *what* credential to pursue — the full menu of healthcare, tech, and trades pathways with costs, timelines, and failure modes for each. This chapter covers *when* spending on a credential is financially justified. The question here isn't *which* — it's *whether the math works right now.*

The formula is simple:

Payback period = Total cost ÷ Monthly income increase (after taxes)

Take the cleanest example in the book. A forklift certification costs $50-$200 and takes 1-2 days. Warehouse jobs requiring it pay $2-$4/hr more than those that don't. Run the math on a $150 certification that raises your wage by $3/hr:

At 40 hours per week, $3/hr more is $120/week, roughly $480/month before taxes. After taxes, call it $375/month. Your $150 investment pays for itself in *two weeks.* Over a year, you've gained approximately $4,500 in additional take-home pay. That's the difference between permanent triage and occasionally having breathing room.

Now apply that same formula to any credential in Chapter 8's Playbook. If the payback period is under three months, it's almost always worth doing — even if you have to scrape together the money or take on low-interest debt to fund it. Three to twelve months: worth doing if your Category 1 spending is stable and the credential leads to verifiable job openings in your area. Over twelve months: proceed with extreme caution — at poverty-level income, the carrying costs (debt interest, lost time, opportunity cost) can erode the return before it materializes.

The variable most people miss is *time poverty.* A $1,500 certification with a six-month payback looks great on paper. But if the program requires 20 hours a week of coursework while you're working 40+ hours and handling childcare, the real cost isn't $1,500 — it's $1,500 plus months of sleep deprivation plus the risk that exhaustion causes you to fail the exam or lose your current job. Factor in the time, not just the money.

When this doesn't work: When the certification is from a for-profit school charging $8,000 for something the community college offers for $800. When the field isn't hiring in your area. When

the program requires prerequisites you don't have. Check the BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook for actual hiring projections. Call employers directly: "Do you hire people with this certification, and what do you start them at?" If they hedge, walk away.

3. The Geographic Move ($1,500-$5,000 That Restructures Your Entire Budget)

If your rent is $1,200 for a one-bedroom apartment in a city where you earn $14/hr, and the same type of job in a smaller city two hours away pays $13/hr but rent is $650, you just gave yourself a $450/month raise by taking a $1/hr pay cut. That's real math, and it works — sometimes.

The cost of moving is significant: first month's rent, security deposit, a truck rental or a few trips in your car, possibly missing work during the transition. Call it $2,000-$4,000 all-in, depending on how far you're going and whether you have anyone to crash with during the gap.

The payback: if you're saving $400/month on housing, the move pays for itself in 5-10 months. After that, you're running a budget with actual breathing room — maybe for the first time.

When this doesn't work: When you're moving away from your support network — the family members who watch your kids, the friend who lends you $200 in emergencies, the job where your boss actually works with your schedule. Support networks have enormous financial value that doesn't show up on a spreadsheet. If moving costs you your childcare, your emergency safety net, and your flexible employer, the $400/month in rent savings might be a net loss. Also: some "cheap" areas are cheap because there are no jobs, no transit, no services, and no path out. Research the job market before you research apartments. A cheap place to live with no way to earn is just a pleasant location to be broke in.

How to fund the move when you're starting from zero: The $2,000-$4,000 figure is real, but it doesn't have to come all at once. Start by locking down a job in the destination — apply remotely, do phone interviews, get an offer letter before you sign a lease. Then: sell what you're not taking (even small sales add up), check if your new employer offers relocation assistance or a signing bonus (many warehouse, healthcare, and CDL jobs do), look into rental assistance programs in the destination city, and ask whether you can negotiate a

delayed start date to give yourself a savings window. If you have someone to crash with at the destination for two to four weeks, your upfront cost drops dramatically — first month's rent and security deposit are the biggest chunks, and pushing those back even two paychecks changes the math. This isn't a leap of faith. It's a sequence.

4. The Phone and Internet Plan ($50-$80/month That Enables Everything Else)

This one seems small, but it's foundational. In the current economy, a smartphone with a data plan isn't a luxury — it's a utility. You need it to apply for jobs (most applications are online-only). You need it for gig work (every gig platform is app-based). You need it for scheduling (most employers use app-based scheduling now). You need it for banking (mobile deposits save you the check-cashing fee). You need it for communication (try coordinating childcare by payphone). You need it for learning (every free certification resource is online).

A decent prepaid plan with enough data to actually do these things costs $40-$60/month. If you have home internet, you can drop to a cheaper phone plan with less data. If you don't have home internet, the phone plan *is* your internet, and you need the data. The FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program ended in June 2024 when Congress didn't renew funding, but the Lifeline program still offers $9.25/month toward phone or internet for qualifying households, and successor programs are in various stages of development — check fcc.gov/acp for the latest. Some carriers offer discounted plans for low-income users.

The point is: a phone plan isn't Category 4 spending. It's Category 2 — infrastructure. Cutting your phone to save $50/month while losing access to gig work that could earn you $300/month is the wrong math. This is the thing about triage: sometimes the spending that looks least essential is the spending that enables everything else.

When this doesn't work: When you're paying $120/month for a plan you could replace with a $40 prepaid option. When you're financing a $1,200 phone when a $150 refurbished phone does the same job. The principle is connectivity, not the latest hardware.

Your phone needs to make calls, run apps, and access the internet. It does not need to have a ceramic shield and a cinematic mode.

The "What Would This Cost Me NOT to Buy" Framework

Here's a mental model that flips the standard spending analysis on its head. Normally, when you're deciding whether to spend money, you ask: "Can I afford this?" And when you're broke, the answer is almost always no, so you don't buy it.

But sometimes the right question isn't "What does this cost?" — it's "What does it cost me *not* to buy this?"

The $150 dental filling you defer becomes the $2,500 root canal and crown. Cost of not buying: $2,350, plus the days of work you miss in pain.

The $50 work boots you don't buy means you're wearing out your current shoes every three months at $25 a pair. Cost of not buying: $50 per year, plus the foot pain that slows you down, plus the appearance issue at the job that requires professional footwear.

The $1,000 CNA certification you don't get means you stay at $13/hr instead of $17/hr. Cost of not buying: $8,000 per year in foregone income.

The $7,500 reliable car you don't buy means another year of breakdowns, missed shifts, and repair bills. Cost of not buying: $3,000-$4,000 in repairs plus $500-$700 in lost wages.

This framework doesn't solve the cash problem — you still need the money, and "the thing I should buy costs less than not buying it" doesn't generate dollars out of thin air. But it does something important: it reframes strategic spending as investment rather than indulgence. When you're broke, every expenditure feels like a loss. The "cost of not buying" framework helps you see that some expenditures are actually net gains — and that the guilt you feel about spending money on them is the wrong emotion for the situation.

When to Take On "Good Debt" for Trajectory Spending

Let's be honest about debt. The standard personal finance advice is simple: avoid debt. Pay off what you have. Don't borrow. Live within your means.

This advice is correct and useless in roughly equal measure. It's correct because debt at high interest rates is genuinely destructive. A credit card at 24% APR will eat you alive, and payday loans at 400% APR should be classified as a weapon. But the advice is useless because it treats all debt as equally bad and all borrowing as equally irresponsible, which ignores the possibility that some debt can be strategic.

Here's the test for "good debt" when you're at this income level:

1. **Does the expenditure directly increase your earning power by a measurable amount?** Not "theoretically" or "eventually" — can you point to a specific dollar-per-hour increase, a specific job opportunity, a specific cost reduction? If the ROI is vague, the debt is bad.
2. **Is the payback period less than 12 months?** At poverty-level income, you can't afford to wait two years for an investment to pay off. The compounding costs of the debt itself will eat the return. If a $1,000 certification produces $500/month in additional income, the payback period is two months. That's good debt. If a $5,000 program produces $200/month in additional income, the payback period is 25 months, and you'll pay $1,000+ in interest along the way if you financed it at a high rate. That's marginal at best.
3. **Is the interest rate below 15%?** Ideally much lower. A personal loan at 10% for a reliability-changing car purchase is reasonable. A credit card at 24% for the same purchase is dangerous. A payday loan for *anything* is never the answer — the math doesn't work at 400% under any circumstances, full stop.
4. **Can you make the monthly payments without sacrificing Category 1 spending?** If borrowing $3,000 for a certification means you can't make rent during the program, you haven't solved a problem — you've traded a poverty problem for a homelessness problem. The trajectory spending has to sit on top of survival spending, not instead of it.

If all four conditions are met, taking on debt for a trajectory expenditure can be one of the highest-value financial decisions you make. If any of them aren't met, walk away and find another path to the same goal — a subsidized program, a longer savings timeline, an employer-sponsored option.

WARNING: The Buy-Here-Pay-Here Trap

Where you borrow matters as much as what you buy. A credit union auto loan on a $7,500 car at 6-8% APR over 48 months costs roughly $8,400-$8,800 total. That same car from a Buy-Here-Pay-Here lot — the ones with the inflatable gorillas and the "NO CREDIT CHECK!" banners — typically runs 18-29% APR. At 24% over 48 months, you'll pay approximately $12,300. At 29%, over $13,400 — nearly double *the sticker price. BHPH lots target people who can't get approved elsewhere. The cars are overpriced, the terms are front-loaded with interest, and they install GPS trackers so they can repo the moment you're late. Before you set foot on a BHPH lot, try in order: (1) any credit union — many have programs for borrowers with scores under 600; (2) a bank pre-approval, because 15% is still better than 25%; (3) a private-party purchase with cash or a personal loan. The BHPH lot is the lender of last resort, and last resort means last* resort*. The math on these deals almost never passes the four-condition test above.*

And for the record: the guilt you might feel about taking on debt when you're already struggling is the voice of a financial system that treats all borrowing by poor people as irresponsible while treating all borrowing by rich people as "leveraging." A real estate investor who borrows $500,000 at 4% to buy a rental property is "building wealth." A nursing assistant who borrows $1,500 at 8% to get her certification and double her earning power is "living beyond her means." The math is the same; the judgment is different. Trust the math.

Making the Framework Real: Lorena's Triage

Let me tell you about Lorena — she's a composite, but her math is real. She was thirty-four, working the front desk at a medical clinic for $13.50 an hour, and she'd been running the triage framework without knowing it had a name — for years.

Her Category 1 was locked: $950 rent, $280 food (she'd gotten SNAP down to a science), $130 utilities. Category 2 was a 2009 Nissan Sentra she couldn't afford to fix and couldn't afford to lose, plus a $45 phone plan. Category 4 was basically nonexistent — she'd canceled everything cuttable two years ago. Category 3 was zero. It had been zero for as long as she could remember.

Then her clinic started offering tuition reimbursement for medical coding certification — a program that cost $2,400, which the clinic

would cover $1,800 of. Her out-of-pocket: $600, plus three months of evening classes. Medical coders at her clinic started at $21/hour. That's a $7.50/hour raise. $15,600 a year. The payback math was almost embarrassing: $600 invested, $15,600 returned, payback period of two weeks.

She almost didn't do it. The $600 — which she'd have to scrape together from three months of the thinnest margin imaginable — felt reckless. The guilt said: *That money should go to the Sentra. That money should go to savings. That money isn't yours to spend on a maybe.* But she'd been doing the math in her head for weeks, and the math was clear. The certification would change the slope.

She enrolled. She ate a lot of rice. The Sentra made a new noise she pretended not to hear. Three months later she passed the exam, applied for an internal transfer, and got it. Her first paycheck at the new rate was $840 more than her old one — in a single pay period, she'd earned back her $600 investment and then some.

Lorena didn't follow a guru's advice. She ran a triage, identified her one Category 3 bet, and took it. That's the framework in action.

Putting It Together: A Triage Spending Audit

Here's a practical exercise. Get your last bank statement — or if you're working in cash, write down what you spent last month as best you can remember. Assign every expenditure to one of the four categories:

1. **Survival** — rent, food, utilities, essential medication
2. **Infrastructure** — transportation, phone, work clothes, childcare
3. **Trajectory** — certification, education, reliable car upgrade, strategic move
4. **Everything else**

Now calculate the percentages.

The goal isn't to eliminate Categories 1 and 2 — you can't. The goal is to find any way, however small, to redirect dollars from Category 4 and the lower-priority parts of Category 2 toward Category 3. Even $50 a month toward a trajectory fund changes the timeline. At $50/month, you can afford a forklift certification in one month, a phlebotomy certification in six months, a CNA program in ten months. Those timelines feel long when you're in triage. They feel short when you look back at the alternative: spending the next

five years at the same hourly rate because you never carved out the money to change it.

And if the audit reveals zero Category 3 dollars and zero Category 4 dollars — if every single cent is going to Survival and Infrastructure — then the answer isn't "triage harder." The answer is that your income isn't high enough for any spending framework to help, and you need an income intervention: a better job, a second income source, a benefits program you haven't accessed, a housing situation that costs less. The triage framework only works when there's something to triage. If the blood supply is empty, the surgery can't proceed.

A Word About Category 4 (Before You Cut It to Zero)

One more thing, because I've watched people take the triage framework and weaponize it against themselves: pure austerity breaks people. The goal isn't to eliminate Category 4 — it's to be deliberate about it.

The $3 library book sale find that isn't on any credential reading list. The birthday candles for your kid's cake, even though candles don't have an ROI. The one hour on a Sunday afternoon where you're not optimizing, not calculating, not triaging — where you're just a person sitting somewhere quiet, doing something pointless and small that reminds you why you're doing all this strategic work in the first place.

These moments aren't leaks in the system. They're what keeps the system running. Austerity has a failure point — the place where you've cut so deep into "everything else" that your mental health collapses and takes Categories 1 through 3 down with it. Chapter 2 made this case in detail: positive experiences aren't luxuries, they're psychological infrastructure. A $5 expenditure that keeps you functional is a better investment than a $5 savings deposit that pushes you past your breaking point.

Be deliberate. Be strategic. And leave yourself room to be a person.

The Close

So here's the thing about "spend on what matters."

Perkins is right — you should. The difference is that when you're broke, you already are. You just don't get to feel good about it. Nobody posts their rent check on Instagram with a caption about living their best life. Nobody humblebrags about their "intentional spending" on electricity.

But that's what you're doing. Every month, with imperfect information and insufficient resources and a system that charges you extra for being broke, you are performing one of the most sophisticated financial optimizations in the economy. You are spending on what counts. You just don't have anything left over to spend on what counts *to you*.

The triage framework won't fix that overnight. But it gives you a map. It tells you where you are, what's keeping you there, and — if you can scrape together the resources for even one Category 3 bet — what might get you somewhere else. That's not Maslow's self-actualization. It's not Perkins' "memory dividends." It's something more basic and more radical: the belief that you deserve a budget that includes a future.

You do. You deserve a line item that isn't survival. You deserve a dollar that's pointed forward instead of just keeping you in place. The spreadsheet says it's a good investment. Trust the spreadsheet. For once, let the math work in your favor.

That woman in the workshop — the one whose values were food, shelter, and not dying — she had it right. She just didn't have the framework yet. And if the only way to get from where she is to where she deserves to be is to take a strategic, calculated, guilt-inducing risk on herself — a certification, a car, a move, a plan — then the risk is worth it. Not because some billionaire told her to spend on what matters. Because *she* is what matters, and she's been underfunding herself for years.

Next chapter: "The Fulfillment Bucket" — Perkins says life is about acquiring memories. We'll look at what fulfillment means when you're still working on Maslow's basement.

Part IV: The Way Out (Or At Least, Further In)

Chapter 10: "The Fulfillment Bucket" — Fulfillment Is a Luxury Brand

> "The business of life is the acquisition of memories. In the end, that's all there is." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
> "The business of my life is getting to a place where I can think about the business of my life." — *A welder in Memphis who's been reading self-help books during his lunch break for six years and keeps hitting the same wall*

The Hook

You're scrolling at 11:40 p.m. and an ad appears for a "life design" workshop. Four weekends. $2,400. A woman in linen pants on a cliff, palms open, radiating the energy of someone who has never Googled "can I get my electricity turned back on the same day." The tagline: *"Stop surviving. Start thriving."*

And you think: *I would love to stop surviving. I'd settle for surviving without the shower math — can I afford both the electric bill and the co-pay for my kid's ear infection?*

The workshop isn't wrong. Fulfillment matters. Purpose matters. It's just that nobody selling fulfillment wants to talk about the prerequisites.

The Inversion

Bill Perkins dedicates significant philosophical real estate in *Die With Zero* to the concept of fulfillment — the idea that money is merely a tool for purchasing a meaningful life, and that the ultimate measure of a life well-lived isn't net worth but the richness of your experiences and the depth of your contentment. He's building on a long tradition — what psychologists call self-actualization, the top of Maslow's pyramid.

The framework is seductive. Stop chasing money for its own sake. Figure out what actually makes you happy. Spend your resources — time, money, energy — on *that*. Die with an empty bank account and a full heart.

Beautiful. Really. No sarcasm. As a philosophical proposition, it's hard to argue with.

But here's what Perkins' fulfillment framework assumes, quietly, without ever stating it outright: that you've already handled the layers underneath. That you have food security. That your housing is stable. That your health needs are met. That your debts are manageable. That your income exceeds your survival costs by a margin wide enough to direct the surplus toward something called "fulfillment."

In other words: the fulfillment bucket assumes you already have a bucket. A lot of people are still trying to find a container that doesn't leak.

Abraham Maslow figured this out in 1943. His hierarchy of needs — the pyramid every intro psych student has seen — puts self-actualization at the top. Not because it's the most important, but because it's the last thing that becomes possible. You don't contemplate your purpose while you're being chased by a bear. You don't optimize for meaning while you're wondering where tonight's meal is coming from. The hierarchy isn't a value judgment; it's a sequence of operations. You literally cannot access the higher functions until the lower ones are handled. That's not a character flaw. That's how brains work.

Perkins' fulfillment bucket sits at the top of Maslow's pyramid and shouts down to the people at the bottom: "Come on up! The view is great!"

Which — again — is true. The view *is* great up there. But the ladder has missing rungs, several of them are greased, and someone removed the bottom three and replaced them with a credit check.

The inversion isn't that fulfillment doesn't matter. It does. The inversion is that fulfillment is not a starting point for financial planning — it's a destination, and for millions of Americans, the journey to get there passes through several levels of need that don't appear in books written by billionaires. Not because those authors are callous, but because those needs have been invisible to them for so long they forgot they exist, the way you forget about oxygen until someone takes it away.

So let's build the actual ladder. Rung by rung. Starting from the ground.

The Reality

The Hierarchy of Financial Needs

Maslow had five levels. We're going to build five of our own, specific to the financial journey from zero to something-better-than-zero. This isn't abstract philosophy — each level has observable markers, specific psychological effects, and a distinct set of strategies. Think of it as a diagnostic tool. Figure out which level you're on, and you'll know what to work on next. Not what some guru says you should work on. What actually comes next in the sequence.

Level 1: Crisis Survival

Markers: You are not sure how next week works. Rent is uncertain. Food is a logistics problem, not a preference. You are choosing between bills — not budgeting, choosing. The electricity might get cut off. You might have an eviction notice. You are in contact with at least one social service, or you should be. Your planning horizon is measured in days.

What it feels like: Your brain is in constant triage mode. Every decision is urgent. You can't think about next month because next week is a live wire. People at this level report a particular kind of exhaustion that isn't really physical — it's cognitive. The bandwidth tax means you're not bad at planning. You're running a supercomputer on a phone charger.

What it requires: Stabilization. Stop the bleeding by accessing every resource available — SNAP, 211, food banks, utility assistance, Medicaid, emergency rental assistance. This is not charity. This is infrastructure. Use it.

Approximately 44.2 million people in the United States lived in food-insecure households in 2022. That's "I'm not sure what we're eating Thursday" in a way that's mundane and constant and so grinding that it colonizes every other thought you try to have.

Level 2: Stability

Markers: Bills are getting paid. Maybe not early, but on time, or close to it. You have a bank account. You have a small emergency reserve — even $200-$500 changes the math dramatically. You are not relying on payday loans or predatory lending. Your income covers your expenses most months. There's not much left over, but the bleeding has stopped.

What it feels like: Relief, primarily. But also a strange vulnerability, because you can feel how thin the ice is. You've gotten to a place where things work, but the margin is so small that any unexpected expense threatens to drop you back to Level 1. Psychologists call this "financial fragility," and it has measurable health effects. A 2020 study in *Social Science & Medicine* found that financial fragility — the inability to access $2,000 within 30 days for an emergency — was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and chronic stress, even among people who weren't technically below the poverty line. You can be "stable" and still feel like you're holding the walls up with your hands.

What it requires: Building a $500-$1,000 buffer — the threshold the Federal Reserve's research identifies as separating people who can absorb a small emergency from people who spiral. The strategies are in Chapter 3: automated micro-savings, round-up apps, redirected windfalls. This is also where you start attacking predatory debt — payday loans first, then high-interest credit cards — because that debt is a gravitational force pulling you backward.

That welder in Memphis reading self-help at lunch? He's probably here. Level 2 is where people start looking up from survival long enough to wonder if the next rung is reachable.

Level 3: Breathing Room

Markers: You are approximately one month ahead on your bills. You have some discretionary spending — not a lot, but some. You can absorb a $500-$1,000 emergency without borrowing. You have

a checking *and* savings account. Your credit score is moving in the right direction. You can occasionally say yes to something that isn't a survival need — a dinner out, a birthday present that isn't from the dollar store, a streaming subscription that you don't feel guilty about.

What it feels like: This is where something strange happens. The constant noise in your head — the ambient hum of financial terror that's been your background soundtrack for months or years — starts to quiet. Not disappear. Quiet. And in that new quiet, you start to feel things you didn't have bandwidth for before. Sometimes that's good: you notice your kid's laugh, you remember that you like cooking, you think about the future without flinching. Sometimes it's unsettling: the stress was so familiar that its absence feels wrong, like taking off a heavy backpack and feeling like you're going to float away. Some people at this level unconsciously sabotage their progress because stability feels foreign and the crisis state was at least a known quantity. If that's you, know that it's normal. Your nervous system was calibrated for survival mode. Adjusting takes time.

What it requires: At this level, you're building the habits that will carry you forward. Consistent saving — even small amounts. Starting to think about career trajectory, not just this week's schedule. Protecting your credit score like it's a fragile, weird little animal that controls your future — because it is. And critically: learning to spend on yourself without guilt. People who've lived at Levels 1 and 2 often develop a scarcity reflex that makes any non-essential spending feel dangerous. But at Level 3, some discretionary spending is *healthy*. It's the first faint signal that you're building a life, not just surviving one.

Level 4: Momentum

You have a career trajectory, not just a job. Your savings are growing. Investing is possible — even if it's $50 a month into an index fund, it's happening. You have a plan that extends beyond the next paycheck. Your emergency fund covers one to three months of expenses. You're starting to think about things like retirement contributions, skill development, or education — not because a poster in the break room told you to, but because you can finally see a path where those things make sense.

The shift: Momentum feels like compound interest feels: invisible at first, then suddenly real. There's a day when you check your

savings account and the number is higher than you expected, and you feel something you might not recognize immediately. It's agency. The sense that your decisions are starting to *add up* rather than cancel each other out. But there's a trap at this level too: comparison. Once you have enough stability to look around, you start noticing how far ahead other people are — people who started with more, inherited more, had safety nets you didn't. The gap can feel demoralizing even as your own trajectory is genuinely improving. This is where defining "enough" — which we'll get to — becomes critical.

The work: Strategic investment of time and money. At Level 4, the question shifts from "how do I survive?" to "how do I build?" That might mean investing in credentials, changing jobs for trajectory instead of just taking whatever pays, building professional networks, or starting to invest. This is also where you begin to benefit from the financial advice that was useless at lower levels. "Pay yourself first" starts to make sense when you actually have income to split. "Invest early" becomes actionable when you have disposable income to invest. The mainstream financial wisdom wasn't wrong — it was just designed for people who were already at Level 4.

Level 5: Choice

You can say no. That's the defining feature of Level 5. You can say no to a bad job because you have savings to bridge a gap. You can say no to a bad apartment because your credit and income give you options. You can take a calculated risk — starting a business, going back to school, moving to a city with better opportunities — because you have a cushion to absorb the failure case. Your decisions are driven by strategy and preference, not desperation. You have goals that extend beyond survival.

The shift: Freedom, but a specific kind. Not the freedom of wealth — the freedom of adequacy. You have *enough.* Enough to breathe, enough to choose, enough to absorb a hit without losing everything. Perkins' fulfillment bucket? *This* is where it becomes accessible. Not because you're rich, but because your survival needs are met reliably enough that your brain has spare cycles for higher-order questions like "What do I actually want?" and "What kind of life am I building?"

The work: At Level 5, the work is mostly psychological and strategic. You're protecting what you've built while continuing to grow. You're defining what "enough" means *for you* — not for Instagram, not for your family's expectations, not for the culture at large. And

you're building a life sustainable enough that you don't fantasize about escaping it. That's the real fulfillment: not a bucket list of experiences, but a daily existence that doesn't require a vacation to recover from.

The Space Between Levels

Here's something nobody tells you about climbing this hierarchy: the transitions are harder than the levels themselves.

Going from Level 1 to Level 2 requires a kind of faith that borders on irrational — you have to believe that small, consistent actions will add up, even though everything in your experience says they won't. Going from Level 2 to Level 3 requires fighting the scarcity mindset that got you through Levels 1 and 2 but will hold you back at Level 3. Going from Level 3 to Level 4 requires taking risks that feel terrifying after years of playing it safe. And going from Level 4 to Level 5 requires something that sounds simple but isn't: deciding that you've arrived.

Each transition also involves a kind of identity shift. Your survival identity — the person who knows how to stretch $47 across a week, who can meal-plan like a logistics specialist, who has memorized which gas station has the cheapest prices — that identity served you. It kept you alive. But it can also become a cage. People who've been poor often struggle to let go of poverty-mode behaviors even when those behaviors are no longer necessary. You keep the thermostat at 62 even when you can afford 70. You feel guilty buying new shoes even when the old ones have holes. You hoard ketchup packets from fast food restaurants even when your pantry is full. These aren't character flaws — they're survival adaptations that haven't gotten the memo that the war is over.

A 2019 study published in *Psychological Science* found that people who had experienced financial hardship continued to exhibit scarcity-related decision-making patterns even after their financial situations improved — sometimes for years. The researchers called it "scarcity carry-over." Your bank account can change faster than your brain.

The "Enough" Problem

Now we need to talk about the word that American culture hates more than any other four-letter word: *enough*.

The entire engine of consumer capitalism runs on the principle that you do not have enough. Not enough stuff. Not enough status. Not enough square footage. Not enough followers. Not enough abs. The machine requires your perpetual dissatisfaction to function. If everyone woke up tomorrow and said "actually, I'm good," the economy as we know it would collapse by Thursday.

This isn't a conspiracy theory. It's a business model. The U.S. advertising industry spends approximately $300 billion per year on manufacturing your inadequacy.

The hedonic treadmill — where increased income produces diminishing returns of satisfaction — operates at every level. Kahneman's original 2010 research placed the threshold around $75,000 (about $95,000 in 2024 dollars). A 2023 reconciliation study by Killingsworth at Wharton found the picture is more nuanced: happiness continues to rise with income above $100,000 for most people, but flattens sharply for the unhappiest 20%. Either way, the part that matters for this book is what both studies agree on: below that threshold, every dollar matters enormously.

Here's why this matters if you're climbing from zero: the treadmill doesn't wait. It starts the moment you have anything. You reach Level 2 and start comparing yourself to Level 4. The car that felt like a miracle now looks shabby next to your coworker's. The treadmill eats your progress before you can feel it.

Defining "enough" — explicitly, consciously, in writing — is the only defense. Not because ambition is bad, but because ambition without a defined target is just anxiety in a motivational poster.

The Playbook

Step 1: Locate Yourself on the Hierarchy

Before you can move up, you need to know where you are. Not where you feel like you are — where you actually are.

Can you cover your basic needs this month without borrowing or skipping something? No → Level 1. Yes, but barely

→ Level 2. Yes, with a $500-$1,000 cushion → Level 3. Yes, with growing savings and forward motion → Level 4. Yes, with genuine choices about what comes next → Level 5.

Write it down. "I am at Level _____." You can't get directions to somewhere if you don't know where you're starting from.

Step 2: Define "Enough" — Your Version

This is the most important exercise in this book, and I mean that. Not the emergency fund strategies, not the debt triage, not the resource lists. This. Because without a definition of "enough," you will climb the hierarchy and never feel like you've arrived. The treadmill will eat everything.

Get a piece of paper, or open a note on your phone, or use the back of an envelope — whatever you've got. Answer these questions:

What does "stable" look like for you? Not rich. Not Instagram. Stable. Be specific. A number. A situation. "Stable means: rent is paid by the first. I have $2,000 in savings. My car runs. I can take my kid to the doctor without a panic attack." Whatever it is, write the actual picture.

What does "comfortable" look like? One step above stable. What changes? Maybe it's: "I can go to a restaurant once a month without calculating whether I can afford it. I can buy my kid sneakers that aren't from the clearance bin. I can put $200 a month into savings and not feel it." Write the picture.

What does "good" look like? Not perfect. Not wealthy. Good. This is the life where you don't fantasize about a different life. Where the daily texture of your existence is something you chose, not something that happened to you. Write what that looks like — the apartment, the schedule, the bank balance, the feeling.

Now: what does "enough" look like? This is the number, the situation, the life where you can say: "I made it." Not "I made it" in a culture-defined, magazine-cover way. "I made it" in *your* way. The way that means you can stop clenching your jaw and start actually living.

Here's the radical part: for some people, "enough" is $45,000 a year, a paid-off Honda, and a two-bedroom apartment in a safe neighborhood. And that is a completely legitimate, fully valid, genuinely successful life. The entire apparatus of American aspiration

will try to convince you it isn't. That's the apparatus talking. It's not talking to you — it's talking to your wallet.

Step 3: The Good-Enough Principle

A concept that will save you tens of thousands of dollars and probably lower your blood pressure: **good enough.** Not settling. Strategic allocation of limited resources toward maximum actual wellbeing, rather than maximum perceived status.

The $15,000 car vs. the $40,000 car. A reliable Honda Civic gets you to work and runs for 200,000 miles. A new SUV with leather seats does the same thing while costing $25,000 more plus interest, higher insurance, and instant depreciation. The difference in transportation utility is near zero. That $25,000 is the price of status. If you're climbing from zero, you cannot afford to buy status.

The apartment that's safe vs. the apartment that "looks successful." The difference between a functional $900 apartment and a "nice" $1,400 apartment is $6,000 a year directed at aesthetics. If you're at Level 2 or 3, that $6,000 is the difference between building a real emergency fund and staying fragile. Choose the apartment that builds your future, not the one that photographs well.

The good-enough principle isn't about deprivation. It's about *allocation*. Every dollar you spend on status is a dollar you can't spend on stability. And stability — boring, unsexy, nobody-posts-about-it stability — is the foundation that everything else is built on. Including, eventually, the fulfillment that Perkins is so enthusiastic about.

Step 4: Build a Life You Don't Need to Escape From

"Instead of wondering when your next vacation is, maybe set up a life you don't need to escape from." What if, instead of optimizing for peak experiences and vacation days, you optimized for *daily sustainability*? What if the target was a regular Tuesday that didn't make you want to scream?

This isn't naive — it's strategic. Here's what it actually requires:

Work that doesn't destroy you. Not a dream job. Work that pays adequately, doesn't wreck your body or your mind, and leaves you with enough energy to be a human being. Prioritize schedule predictability and non-toxic management over raw salary. A job

that pays $2 more per hour but adds 45 minutes to your commute and a boss who texts at 10 p.m. is not a raise — it's a trap with a slightly higher number on it.

Housing that feels like home. A place where you can close the door and exhale. Optimize for *livability* rather than *impressiveness* — that's one of the highest-return investments you can make.

Relationships that aren't transactional. Financial stress introduces shame, secrets, and power imbalances. Invest in honest, reciprocal relationships — people who know where you actually are, not where you're pretending to be.

Margins that allow for small pleasures. Not luxury. Margins. The $5 coffee once a week. The library card that's actually used. The meal cooked slowly on a day off. Psychologist Ed Diener's work on subjective well-being found that small, frequent positive events have a larger impact on life satisfaction than infrequent large ones. The $5 coffee every Saturday morning might do more for your fulfillment than the $5,000 vacation you take once a year. And it costs 95% less.

Step 5: Protect Your Progress From the Treadmill

You will reach a level — whatever level it is — where things are objectively better than they were. And the treadmill will try to convince you that they're not good enough. Here's how to fight it:

Keep a record. Not a gratitude journal — something more concrete. Write down the specific markers of each level as you pass through them. "On [date], I paid all my bills on time for the first time in six months." "On [date], my savings account hit $1,000." "On [date], I bought new tires without putting them on a credit card." These are victories. They don't look like victories because nobody throws a parade for paying your electric bill — but they are. Record them so that when the treadmill tells you you're not making progress, you can show it the receipts.

Limit exposure to aspiration content. Social media has fundamentally broken the way we evaluate our own lives. Your comparison pool used to be your neighborhood. Now it's every human being on earth with a phone and a ring light. You're comparing your real Tuesday to someone's curated Saturday — measuring your Level 3 against someone else's Level 7, staged, filtered, possibly financed by credit card. A 2022 APA survey found that 64% of adults said so-

cial media made them feel worse about their finances; among adults under 35, that was 72%. The fix isn't deleting Instagram. It's being deliberate. Unfollow the lifestyle accounts that make you feel poor. Unfollow the finance bros who make you feel behind. Follow people who are honest about the climb, who talk about Level 2 wins and Level 3 struggles, who make you feel seen rather than insufficient. Your feed is a psychological environment. Curate it like you'd curate the air you breathe.

Revisit your "enough" definition every six months. Not to raise it — to *check* it. The treadmill's primary strategy is scope creep: the quiet, incremental expansion of what counts as "enough" until it always means "slightly more than what you currently have." Every six months, pull out the "enough" definition you wrote in Step 2 and ask: "Is this still what I actually want? Or has the culture convinced me to want more?" If your answer has changed because your genuine values have evolved, that's fine — update it. If your answer has changed because you saw someone on TikTok with a nicer kitchen, that's the treadmill. Hold the line.

Practice saying "I have enough" out loud. This sounds like a bumper sticker, and I apologize. But there is actual psychological research on the power of explicit satisfaction statements. A 2018 study in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* found that participants who regularly articulated satisfaction with their current circumstances showed measurably lower anxiety and higher life satisfaction than control groups, even when the objective circumstances were identical. Your brain believes what you tell it. If you only ever tell it "not enough, not enough, not enough," it will optimize for anxiety. Tell it something different occasionally.

Step 6: Understand the Difference Between Poverty and Simplicity

This is important enough to say plainly: **poverty is not simplicity, and simplicity is not virtue.**

Poverty is involuntary. It's not choosing to live with less — it's having less forced upon you by circumstance, systems, and mathematics. The person who sells everything to live in a van and blog about minimalism made a choice. The person who lives in their car because they got evicted did not. One of them gets a book deal.

The other gets a parking ticket. If anyone ever tells you that poverty builds character, ask them why they're not lining up to try it.

Simplicity, by contrast, is a *choice* — and it's a choice that is only available to people who have reached at least Level 3 or 4 on the hierarchy. Choosing to drive a modest car when you could afford a nicer one is simplicity. Driving a modest car because it's the only one that passed inspection and you could barely afford *that* is poverty. They look identical from the outside. They feel completely different from the inside.

The voluntary simplicity movement — the tiny houses, the capsule wardrobes, the "I quit my six-figure job to live in a van" YouTube channels — can be genuinely valuable for people who have enough and are looking for meaning beyond consumption. But when it's marketed to people who are involuntarily deprived as though they should feel grateful for their deprivation, it becomes something uglier: a repackaging of "you should be happy with less" directed at people who never had a choice in the matter.

If you're climbing the hierarchy, do not let anyone — any book, any guru, any well-meaning relative — tell you that wanting more is greedy. Wanting stability is not greed. Wanting to pay your bills without anxiety is not greed. Wanting your kids to have opportunities you didn't is not greed. Wanting enough is not the same as wanting too much, no matter how much the simple-living influencers in their $2,000-a-month van conversions want to blur that line.

The goal is to reach a level where simplicity becomes a *choice* — and then, if you want, to choose it. But the choice has to come first. Otherwise it's just poverty with better branding.

The Close

Bill Perkins wants you to fill your fulfillment bucket. I want you to build the bucket first. Pour a foundation under it. Make sure it doesn't have a hole in the bottom from a predatory loan or a medical bill or a landlord who won't fix the plumbing. And then — *then* — fill it with whatever actually matters to you. Not what matters to Perkins, not what matters to Instagram, not what matters to the American Dream Industrial Complex. What matters to *you*, defined by *you*, measured against *your* definition of enough.

Maybe your fulfillment bucket is small. Maybe it's a Saturday morning with coffee and no dread. Maybe it's watching your kid do something they love and knowing you can afford the equipment. Maybe it's the sound your savings account makes when it crosses a number that used to seem impossible — which is no sound at all, actually, just a number on a screen, but you know what I mean. It's the silence where the panic used to be.

That silence is fulfillment. Not the Instagram version, not the workshop-on-a-cliff version, not the billionaire-energy-trader version. The real version. The one you built yourself, one level at a time, from a starting line that nobody designed for you to win from.

It's not a luxury brand. It's yours.

Next chapter: We drop the satirical frame, put the Perkins inversions aside, and talk to you directly about what all of this adds up to — and what comes next.

Chapter 11: Don't Die With Zero — Stop Living With Zero

"The business of life is the acquisition of memories. In the end, that's all there is." — *Bill Perkins,* Die With Zero
"The business of my life has been keeping the lights on. But I'm starting to think there might be more to the business than that." — *Written on a Post-it note stuck to a refrigerator in Akron, Ohio*

The Shift

I've been doing a bit this whole book. Ten chapters of taking a billionaire's advice, flipping it upside down, and seeing what falls out when you hold it up to the life of someone who's already at zero. The satire was a way of seeing — it showed where the assumptions live, the invisible floor that half the country stands on and the other half doesn't know exists.

But we're in the last chapter now, and I want to drop the frame. Not because the system got less absurd — it didn't. Because there's something I want to say to you directly, and the satirical distance, even a millimeter of it, is too much for this.

No more Perkins inversions. Just what this book was really about, what I think you should do with it, and why I think you can.

The Synthesis

Over ten chapters, we built a house from nothing on land nobody gave you the deed to. Here's what you're standing on.

You started by **seeing the penalty** — the invisible surcharge on being broke that costs thousands a year in fees, premiums, and traps with storefronts. That flat tire from Chapter 1 wasn't bad luck. It was a system working as designed, charging you $221 for the privilege of not having $221.

Then you **built the buffer**. Five dollars at a time, into a separate account, toward the $500 that separates a bad month from a catastrophe. You learned that saving at poverty-level income isn't about discipline — it's about outsmarting a brain that scarcity has wired for survival mode.

You **protected your time** — learned to calculate what an hour of your life actually costs, the way Marcus did when he realized his 63-hour week was earning him less per hour than the number on his paycheck suggested. The way Keisha did when she ran the real numbers on gig work and walked away. You stopped treating exhaustion as a character flaw and started treating rest as a financial tool.

You **built the floor nobody handed you**. The financial literacy, the credit knowledge, the generational starting line that wealth transfers to some families and withholds from others. That $25 custodial account isn't going to make your kid rich. But it's going to make them someone who starts.

You **took asymmetric bets** — the kind that risk what you can afford to lose and gain what you can't afford to miss. The way Darius did with a welding certification that cost $1,100 and changed the slope of his entire earning life.

You **expanded the planning horizon** from next Friday to next quarter. You **learned to spend strategically** — the way Lorena did when she scraped together $600 for a coding certification and earned it back in her first paycheck at the new rate.

And you **defined enough** — not someone else's Instagram version, but your own. The silence where the panic used to be.

That's not a budget or a mindset shift. That's a strategy — and it works from zero.

The Plan

Enough philosophy. Here's the operational path — a specific, start-tomorrow plan. Every step references the chapter with the full tactics, and the detailed action list is in Appendix A, organized by income tier. The point is movement. Not wins. Not transformations. Just: the next thing. Then the next thing after that.

Week 1: See the Board

Spend one hour listing every poverty penalty you're paying — check-cashing fees, overdrafts, late fees, high-interest debt. Circle the most expensive one. Calculate your true hourly wage across all income sources. This is reconnaissance, not budgeting. *(Chapters 1 and 4)*

Month 1: Build the Foundation

Open a bank account if you don't have one — that single move can save $900–$1,500 a year. Set up automatic micro-saving toward $500, even $5 a week. Fix the biggest leak you circled. Claim every benefit you're eligible for: SNAP, Medicaid, EITC, LIHEAP — dial 211 if you're not sure where to start. *(Chapters 1 and 3; full benefit list in Appendix B)*

Month 3: Reach the First Milestone

Hit $500 in emergency savings, or be on track to. Research one credential that could raise your income — not enroll, research. Start a 30-60-90 day plan: what's coming financially in the next three months, written down on paper. *(Chapters 3, 7, and 8)*

Month 6: Shift the Trajectory

Your poverty penalty should be cut by at least half. Begin the credential or training program you identified. Reassess your spending: which dollars are keeping you alive today, and which could be redirected toward changing your future? *(Chapters 6, 8, and 9)*

Year 1: Reach Stability

Arrive at Level 2 on the hierarchy: bills paid without constant crisis, a buffer that absorbs a single emergency, a plan that extends past

next Friday. Stability isn't wealth. It's the platform from which everything else becomes possible. *(Chapter 10; full action sequences in Appendix A)*

That's the operational path. Now the harder part — the thing that isn't tactics or timelines.

The Dual Acknowledgment

Now here's the part where I have to hold two things in my hands at the same time, and I need you to hold them with me, because if you drop either one, the whole thing falls apart.

Thing One: The system is broken.

Not "could be improved." Broken. The poverty penalty is structural. The wage stagnation is structural. Housing costs, healthcare prices, the lack of affordable childcare, the collapse of public transit, the gutting of the safety net — structural. The credit scoring system that punishes you for having been poor, the payday loan industry that exists because banks won't serve you, the entire architecture of an economy that generates enormous wealth and distributes it so that 37% of the country can't cover a $400 emergency — all structural. Not millions of simultaneous bad decisions. Policy, incentives, and institutional design.

There are roughly 140 million Americans who are poor or low-income. Not a rounding error. Not a fringe. Nearly half the country. If that many people are struggling, the problem is not 140 million individual character flaws. The problem is structural.

When you can't get ahead despite working full-time, you are not failing. The system is performing exactly as designed, and you are experiencing the intended output. The math doesn't work, and it's not your math. It was broken before you sat down.

This matters. It matters that you know it. Because the most corrosive thing about poverty is not the material deprivation — it's the shame. It's the feeling that you're doing something wrong, that everyone else has figured this out, that if you were just smarter or more disciplined or better at budgeting, you'd be fine. That shame is a lie. It's a useful lie — useful for the people who benefit from you blaming yourself instead of the system — but it's a lie. You're not

bad at money. You don't have enough money. Those are different problems with different solutions.

Thing Two: You have agency.

The system is broken, and you are not helpless within it. Both true. Not contradictory.

The bootstraps crowd says "work harder, budget better." Wrong — it ignores the structural tilt entirely. The pure-systemic-analysis crowd says "nothing changes until the structure changes." Right about the diagnosis, catastrophically unhelpful as a prescription, because your electric bill can't wait for reform.

The real position: **the system is rigged against you, AND you can make moves within it that materially improve your life.** Understanding the structural forces makes your individual moves smarter. Making individual moves isn't "buying into the system" — it's playing the hand you were dealt while the table rules are being contested.

You can advocate for a higher minimum wage and also get a credential that raises your wage this quarter. You can know the healthcare system is predatory and also sign up for the Marketplace plan. These aren't contradictions. They're the dual practice of surviving and pushing back simultaneously, because you don't have the luxury of choosing one.

This dual acknowledgment is not comfortable. You carry the weight of knowing the game is unfair while still playing it as well as you can. It's heavy. But it's honest. And honest is the only thing I promised you.

The Close

You are not a failure.

I need to say that plainly, because the entire machinery of American financial culture is designed to make you believe otherwise. If you are working and you are broke, you are not a failure. If you're doing everything you can and the math still doesn't work, you are not a failure. You are a person operating inside a system that was not designed for you to succeed, and the fact that you are still here, still going, still picking up books with the word "zero" in the title

— that is stubbornness. And stubbornness, in this economy, is a survival skill.

Nearly half the country is in this with you. You knew it every time someone told you to "just budget better" and something in your chest tightened — your body telling you the map doesn't match the territory. That's not your failure of navigation. That's a cartography problem.

But knowing the system is broken does not mean you are stuck. It means you are playing a harder game than the people giving you advice realize. And harder games can still be played — not won, necessarily, but navigated, survived, and inch by inch turned in your favor through the specific, unglamorous moves laid out in this book.

The emergency fund that breaks the cascade. The credential that lifts your wage floor. The planning horizon that lets you see three months ahead instead of three days. These are structural interventions in your own life, made by someone who understands the structure well enough to know where it can be bent.

I wrote this book because the financial advice industry has a blind spot the size of half the country. Because "die with zero" is beautiful advice if you have something to die with, and obscene advice if you don't. You deserve advice that starts where you actually are.

So here's where we end. Not with a miracle. Not with a promise that everything's going to be fine. The system is big and you are one person and the math is genuinely hard.

But you picked up this book. That's a move. You now have a map you didn't have before. You can see the penalty, the leaks, the path from zero to $500 to stability to something resembling a life you chose.

Everything you've learned navigating scarcity — the ability to stretch $34 across a week, to triage bills at 2 a.m., to make decisions under pressure that would paralyze someone who's never had to choose between the electric bill and groceries — those aren't deficits. They're skills, bought at a price nobody should have to pay. Poverty didn't build your character. *You* built your character, in spite of poverty. And when the ground steadies under your feet, those skills don't disappear. They compound.

The system didn't give you a floor. So you're building one. Board by board, paycheck by paycheck, $5 transfer by $5 transfer. It's slower than it should be. It's harder than it should be. And it's yours.

Don't die with zero. But first — stop *living with zero*. Now make the next move.

End of Chapter 11.

Appendix A: The Actual Playbook

The 30 most impactful financial actions you can take, organized by income tier.

All figures reflect 2024-2025 values. Check program websites for current numbers.

This is the cheat sheet. No stories, no statistics, no extended metaphors about burning buildings. Just what to do, why to do it, and where in the book to find the longer explanation. Print this section out. Tape it to your fridge. Dog-ear these pages. Chapter 11 laid out why this matters. This is how.

Three rules before you start:

1. **Find your tier.** Use your actual take-home income, not your gross. If your income fluctuates, use your worst three-month average from the past year.
2. **Work the list in order.** The actions within each tier are sequenced deliberately. Action 1 makes Action 2 easier, and so on.
3. **You don't have to finish a tier before looking at the next one.** But if you skip ahead and ignore the foundations, you're building on sand. You already know how that ends.

TIER 1: $0 - $15,000/year — Crisis Mode *(Chapter 10, Levels 1–2)*

Your single objective: stop losing money you don't have and build the first floor beneath your feet.

Time horizon for this tier: 1-6 months

Action 1: Get banked.

Open a free checking account at a credit union or an online bank with no minimum balance and no monthly fees. If you've been denied before due to ChexSystems history, open a Bank On-certified account or a second-chance account. This takes one afternoon.

Why: You're paying 2-5% of every paycheck just to access your own money. That's the single most expensive recurring cost in your financial life right now. *(Chapter 1)*

Action 2: Apply for every benefit you're eligible for. Today.

Go to Benefits.gov or your state's single-application portal and apply for SNAP (food assistance), Medicaid or CHIP (health coverage), LIHEAP (utility assistance), and the Lifeline program (phone/internet discount). If you have children, add WIC and free school meals. Budget 2-3 hours for the applications. If you need help, call 211 — they will walk you through it.

Why: The average eligible household leaves $3,000-$6,000/year in benefits unclaimed. These programs exist because the math of survival at this income level doesn't work without them. *(Chapter 1; Appendix B for specifics)*

Action 3: File your taxes even if you owe nothing.

If your income is below the filing threshold, file anyway. Use the IRS Free File program or a VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) site near you — both are completely free. Do this even if your income was cash, gig work, or irregular.

Why: The EITC can be worth $600-$7,400 depending on your situation, and roughly one in five eligible people never claim it. That refund might be the largest single deposit you see all year. *(Chapter 1; Appendix B)*

Action 4: Identify and eliminate your most expensive poverty penalty.

Make a list of every fee, surcharge, and premium you pay specifically because you're broke. Check-cashing fees. Payday loan interest. Prepaid debit card fees. Laundromat costs versus having a washing machine. Paying more for smaller quantities at convenience stores

because you can't buy in bulk. Rank them by annual cost. Kill the most expensive one first.

Why: The poverty penalty runs $2,000-$3,000/year for most people in this tier. Pick the single most expensive line item and design around it. *(Chapter 1)*

Action 5: Set up micro-saving toward a $500 emergency fund.

Open a separate savings account (even at the same bank). Set up an automatic transfer of any amount — $5/week, $10/paycheck, whatever doesn't trigger overdraft. If your income is irregular, transfer manually after every deposit: even $2 counts. The target is $500.

Why: $500 separates "an unexpected car repair" from "a financial death spiral." Urban Institute research shows that even $250-$500 in savings reduces eviction, shutoff, and payday loan risk by 30-50%. *(Chapter 3)*

Action 6: Get a free copy of your credit report and dispute errors.

Go to AnnualCreditReport.com (the only actually free site — ignore everything else). Pull your report from all three bureaus. Look for accounts you don't recognize, debts listed as open that were already settled, and incorrect personal information. Dispute anything wrong directly through the bureau's website. Cost: $0. Time: one to two hours.

Why: About 25% of credit reports contain errors — and at this income level, those errors block housing, employment, and better financial products. You're not optimizing for a mortgage. You're making sure lies aren't making your life harder. *(Chapter 3)*

Action 7: Stop any negative-return hustle.

Calculate the true hourly wage (see Chapter 4) of every way you currently make money. Include commute time, gas, wear on your car, supplies, childcare during work hours — everything. If any gig or side hustle pays less than your best alternative per actual hour invested, drop it. This includes gig work that looks like $20/hour on the app but pays $6/hour after expenses.

Why: Some work costs more than it pays once you account for all inputs. A negative-return hustle burns time and energy you could spend on something with actual upward trajectory. Quitting the

wrong job is sometimes the most productive thing you can do. *(Chapter 4)*

Action 8: Negotiate or restructure one existing debt.

Pick the debt that causes you the most immediate pain — the one in collections, the one threatening garnishment, the one with the most insane interest rate. Call the creditor and ask for a hardship plan, reduced settlement, or payment plan. If the debt is in collections, know your rights under the FDCPA before you pick up the phone. Open with: "I'd like to discuss a hardship plan or settlement. What options are available?" Don't agree to anything on the first call — get it in writing first. Many creditors will settle for 30-50 cents on the dollar if you can pay a lump sum.

Your FDCPA Rights (Fair Debt Collection Practices Act): *Collectors can't call before 8 a.m. or after 9 p.m. They can't threaten you with jail. They must validate the debt in writing if you request it within 30 days. These are federal protections — use them.*

Why: You aren't going to pay off all your debt from this tier. The goal is to stop the single worst debt from getting worse or destroying the stability you're building. Triage, not cure. *(Chapter 3)*

Action 9: Build or repair one critical document.

If you're missing a state ID, a birth certificate, a Social Security card, a GED, or any other document that employers, landlords, or benefit programs require — get it. One document. Budget $20-$75 for replacement costs, and one to four weeks for processing.

Why: Missing documents are invisible walls. Every month without a required ID is a month you can't access the jobs, leases, and benefits that would change your income. *(Chapter 8)*

Action 10: Identify one free or low-cost credential relevant to better-paying work in your area.

Research what jobs within a 30-minute commute of your home pay $15-$25/hour and what certifications or training they require. Check your local community college, workforce development center, and library for free or subsidized programs. Identify one credential. You don't have to start it yet — just know what it is and what the pathway looks like.

Why: You're building a map before you walk the territory. When a window opens — a slower season, a tax refund, a stabilizing benefit — you want to know exactly where to aim. *(Chapter 8)*

TIER 2: $15,000 - $30,000/year — Stability Mode *(Chapter 10, Levels 2–3)*

Your single objective: reduce the cost of being you and extend your planning horizon past next week.

Time horizon for this tier: 6-18 months

Action 1: Calculate your true hourly wage across all income sources.

Use the full formula from Chapter 4. Take your gross pay, subtract taxes, work-related expenses (commute, uniforms, childcare, meals out because you're too exhausted to cook), then divide by total hours including commute, getting ready, and decompression time. Write down the real number. Do this for every job or gig you work.

Why: Every financial decision from here forward gets measured against this number. You can't optimize what you haven't measured. *(Chapter 4)*

Action 2: Grow your emergency fund to $1,000.

You should already have the $500 base from Tier 1. Now double it. Increase your automatic transfers. Funnel any windfalls — tax refunds, gifts, overtime pay, sold belongings — directly to the savings account. Keep this money in a high-yield savings account (online banks offered 4-5% APY as of 2024 — rates change, so check current offerings; your traditional bank probably offers 0.01%).

Why: $1,000 covers most single-incident emergencies and changes how you negotiate. When you aren't one flat tire from catastrophe, you can turn down bad deals. Savings buys options. *(Chapter 3)*

Action 3: Set up a spending triage framework.

Divide every dollar into three categories. Survival spending: rent, utilities, minimum food, transportation to work, medications. Investment spending: anything that raises your future earning power or lowers your future costs (credentials, tools, a better commute). Ev-

erything else. Protect the first category absolutely. Fund the second before the third.

Why: Middle-class budgeting assumes surplus. You have a triage problem: you can't fund everything, so you need a ruthless framework for what gets funded first. *(Chapter 9)*

Action 4: Eliminate or replace your most expensive recurring poverty penalty.

Revisit the poverty penalty audit from Tier 1. Now that you have slightly more income and a small cash buffer, you can tackle costlier structural penalties. Rent-to-own contracts. High-interest car loans that could be refinanced. Insurance policies with high premiums due to poor credit. Target the biggest remaining line item. This might require a few hundred dollars upfront to save thousands over time.

Why: Every dollar recaptured from the poverty penalty is a dollar available for investment spending. Reducing a $150/month car payment to $100/month creates $600/year — a credential, half an emergency fund. Recaptured money compounds. *(Chapters 1, 9)*

Action 5: Begin one credential or training program.

Take the credential you identified in Tier 1, Action 10, and start it. If that specific credential no longer makes sense, pick a new one using the same criteria. Prioritize credentials that are: (a) completable in under 12 months, (b) tied to specific job postings you've seen, and (c) free or under $500 total cost. Community colleges, workforce programs, and employer-sponsored training are your best bets.

Why: Income is the only variable that changes your tier. At $25,000/year, you can only cut so much before you hit bone. Credentials are the most reliable way to unlock higher-paying work. *(Chapter 8)*

Action 6: Build a 30-60-90 day plan.

Write down three things: what you will accomplish in the next 30 days, what that unlocks in the next 60, and where you want to be at 90. Keep it to one page. Update it every 30 days. This is not a vision board. This is an operational plan — concrete steps with dates.

Why: Poverty compresses your time horizon to the next paycheck. Expanding it to 90 days radically changes the quality of decisions you can make. *(Chapter 7)*

Action 7: Schedule strategic rest.

Block out time for actual recovery. Not scrolling. Not side-hustling. Not "productive relaxation." Sleep, low-stimulation downtime, and physical rest. If you are currently working more than 50 hours per week across all jobs, this is especially non-negotiable.

Why: Chronic exhaustion degrades decision-making, impulse control, planning, and your ability to learn. Rest is not a reward for finishing the to-do list — it's a prerequisite for doing it well. *(Chapter 4)*

Action 8: Start building a professional network from zero.

Identify three people who work in the field you're trying to enter. They can be acquaintances, former coworkers, people you meet through your credential program, or connections made through workforce development events. Your goal is not to "network" in the LinkedIn-influencer sense. Your goal is to learn: What does the job actually look like day-to-day? How did they get hired? What do they wish they'd known?

Why: Referrals account for 30-50% of all hires. Your current network likely surfaces only the jobs you already know about. Adding even a few contacts in a target industry changes what opportunities reach you. *(Chapter 8)*

Action 9: Identify your single highest-leverage expenditure.

Look at your spending over the past three months. Find one purchase or expense that, if increased, would produce outsized returns. This might be: spending more on reliable transportation (fewer missed shifts), investing in better work tools, paying for professional clothing for interviews, or buying groceries in bulk to cut food costs. Redirect funds from low-value spending toward this one item.

Why: Not all spending is equal. A $200 pair of boots that lasts two years beats three $40 pairs. A $50/month bus pass that eliminates a $300/month car payment nets $250/month. Find the single swap where spending differently produces the greatest return. *(Chapter 9)*

Action 10: Research geographic arbitrage.

If you don't own property and don't have obligations tying you to a specific city, spend an evening researching what your current skills and target credentials are worth in other metro areas or regions. Compare rent-to-income ratios. Check job posting density for your target field. You may not move. But you should know the math.

Why: A $28,000 salary where rent is $1,400/month is a fundamentally different life than the same salary where rent is $700/month. Geography is the largest cost-of-living variable, and the one most people never question. Sometimes moving is impossible. Sometimes it's the highest-return decision you'll ever make. *(Chapter 9)*

TIER 3: $30,000 - $50,000/year — Momentum Mode *(Chapter 10, Levels 3–5)*

Your single objective: convert stability into trajectory. Stop surviving and start compounding.

Time horizon for this tier: 1-3 years

Action 1: Define your "enough."

Sit down and answer this question with a dollar amount and a description: What does a life that is genuinely good — not extravagant, not aspirational, just *good* — cost per year in the place you want to live it? Include housing, food, healthcare, transportation, modest leisure, and savings. Write the number down. This is your target. Everything else is strategy for reaching it.

Why: Without a defined "enough," every raise disappears into lifestyle inflation. It's a navigational tool, not a ceiling on ambition. *(Chapter 10)*

Action 2: Open and fund a Roth IRA.

Open a Roth IRA at a low-cost brokerage (Fidelity, Vanguard, or Schwab all offer $0-minimum accounts). Start with whatever you can — $25/month, $50/month. Invest in a single target-date fund or a total stock market index fund. Set up automatic contributions from your checking account.

Why: Contributions are after-tax, but all growth and retirement withdrawals are tax-free. At your current bracket, you're locking in

the tax advantage at the best possible time. Starting at 30 with $50/month beats starting at 40 with $200/month. *(Chapter 5)*

Action 3: Capture any employer retirement match.

If your employer offers a 401(k), 403(b), or similar plan with a match, contribute at least enough to get the full match. A typical match is 50-100% of your contributions up to 3-6% of your salary. Do this before increasing your Roth IRA contributions.

Why: An employer match is a 50-100% instant, guaranteed return. There is no investment on Earth that beats it. Walking past free money is not frugality. It's a mistake. Take the match. *(Chapter 5)*

Action 4: Raise your emergency fund to one month's expenses.

Calculate your actual monthly survival costs (rent, utilities, food, transportation, insurance minimums). Build your emergency fund to that number. Keep it in a high-yield savings account, separate from your checking. Do not invest it.

Why: One month of expenses is the threshold where you can survive a job loss without crisis and job-search strategically instead of grabbing the first offer out of desperation. *(Chapter 3)*

Action 5: Evaluate and pursue your next credential or career move.

You should now have one completed or nearly completed credential from Tier 2. Assess: Did it lead to the income increase you expected? If yes, is there a next-level credential that builds on it? If no, what did you learn about what actually drives income in your field? Talk to the people in your network. Identify the next concrete step — a promotion path, a lateral move to a better employer, an additional certification, or a pivot.

Why: The biggest income gains come from stacking credentials deliberately over two to five years. One certification gets you in the door; the next gets you to the second floor. Plan the sequence, not just the next step. *(Chapter 8)*

Action 6: Audit your spending for lifestyle inflation.

Compare your monthly spending now to what it was when you earned less. Identify every new recurring expense that appeared as your income rose. For each one, ask: Does this materially improve

my daily life, or did I just let the money find somewhere to go? Cut anything that fails that test.

Why: Lifestyle inflation is why most people who cross $30,000 still feel broke at $50,000. The goal isn't to live like you're in Tier 1 — it's to make deliberate choices about which upgrades are worth it and which are just drift. *(Chapters 9, 10)*

Action 7: Invest any surplus beyond your emergency fund.

Once your emergency fund is at one month of expenses and you're contributing to retirement accounts, open a taxable brokerage account for any additional savings. Same approach: low-cost index funds, automatic contributions. Even $25/month matters here. The habit matters more than the amount.

Why: A savings account earning 4-5% loses to inflation long-term. A diversified index fund has historically returned 7-10% annually over 20+ years. Put money where it grows. Don't touch it. *(Chapter 5)*

Action 8: Optimize for your true hourly wage when making major purchases.

Before any purchase over $200, convert the price into hours of your life at your true hourly wage. A $1,200 phone at a true hourly wage of $14/hour costs 86 hours — more than two full work weeks. A $300 phone costs 21 hours. Decide whether the difference is worth 65 hours of your life.

Why: This reframing tells you what things actually cost in the only currency that matters — your time. Some expensive things are worth it. Many aren't. The conversion forces honesty. *(Chapters 4, 9)*

Action 9: Build in one planned high-leverage experience per quarter.

Budget $50-$200 per quarter for one experience that expands your skills, network, or perspective. A professional conference. A class. A day trip to a city where your industry is concentrated. A workshop. One every three months. Put it on the calendar and protect it.

Why: This is where the *Die With Zero* philosophy actually applies — not "spend freely," but invest in experiences that compound. A $100 industry meetup that leads to a $5,000/year-better job is the

highest-return investment you'll ever make. Experiences at this stage are infrastructure, not leisure. *(Chapters 8, 10)*

Action 10: Update your 30-60-90 plan into a 1-year and 3-year plan.

You now have enough stability and momentum to think in years, not weeks. Write a one-year plan: Where will you be in income, savings, credentials, and career position in twelve months? Then sketch a three-year plan: What does the next tier look like, and what has to happen to get there? Review quarterly.

Why: At Tier 1, a 90-day plan was aspirational. At Tier 3, it's too short. Your decisions now have multi-year consequences, and a three-year plan doesn't have to be precise — it just has to exist, so your daily choices have something to point toward. *(Chapters 7, 10)*

Why This Playbook Stops at $50,000

This playbook stops at $50,000 because that's roughly where the strategies shift. Above this level, mainstream financial advice starts to apply — and you've built the floor to stand on while following it. The budgeting frameworks, the investing guides, the retirement calculators that assumed you had surplus all along? They start to work now, because you actually have surplus. Chapters 5 and 10 cover what comes next.

Quick Reference: Chapter Index

Topic	Primary Chapter
Poverty penalty / getting banked / benefits	Chapter 1
Memory dividends / experiences	Chapter 2
Emergency fund building	Chapter 3
True hourly wage / hustle culture math	Chapter 4
Investing basics / Roth IRA / retirement	Chapter 5
Bold moves / risk framework	Chapter 6
Planning horizons / 30-60-90 plans	Chapter 7
Credentials / networking / career moves	Chapter 8

Topic	Primary Chapter
Spending frameworks / geographic arbitrage	Chapter 9
Defining “enough” / lifestyle inflation	Chapter 10
Synthesis / final plan	Chapter 11
Benefits and resources by category	Appendix B

Tear this appendix out if you need to. That's what it's for.

Appendix B: Resources That Don't Suck

Look, most "resource guides" are written by people who have never needed a resource guide. They list phone numbers that ring to voicemail. They recommend programs that closed in 2014. They tell you to "reach out to your local community action agency" without telling you what the hell a community action agency is or why you'd want to reach out to one.

This appendix is different. Every program, tool, and organization listed here is real, currently operational, and designed for people who are short on money, not short on intelligence. Some of these are government programs you're already paying for with your taxes — you might as well use them. Some are nonprofit services run by people who genuinely give a damn. A few are private-sector tools that happen to be useful even if the company behind them is mostly trying to monetize your data.

No judgment here. No hoops to justify. You need help, here's where to find it.

Benefits and figures current as of 2025. Check program websites for updates.

One note before we start: **211 is your best friend.** Dial 2-1-1 from any phone (or text your zip code to 898-211, or visit 211.org). It connects you to a trained human who knows what's available in your specific area. Think of it as a concierge for people who can't afford a concierge. I'll mention 211 several times below because it really is that useful.

Food

You need to eat. That's not a character flaw.

SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) / Food Stamps

What it is: Monthly money loaded onto an EBT card that works like a debit card at grocery stores, farmers' markets, and even some online retailers like Amazon and Walmart.

Who qualifies: Generally, households with gross income under 130% of the federal poverty level (roughly $20,000/year for a single person, $34,000 for a family of three — but these numbers shift, so check). Some states have expanded eligibility through "broad-based categorical eligibility," which is bureaucrat-speak for "the income limit is higher here."

How to apply: Visit your state's DHHS or social services website. You can also apply in person at your local office. The application takes about 20-30 minutes. You'll need proof of income, ID, and proof of residency. Expect to wait 7-30 days for approval. If you're in a crisis (less than $100 in liquid assets and income below $150/month), ask about expedited processing — they're supposed to get you approved within 7 days.

Editorial note: Yes, there's paperwork. Yes, it can feel dehumanizing. Do it anyway. The average benefit is around $234/month per person (though this fluctuates year to year — check current figures). That's real grocery money.

WIC (Women, Infants, and Children)

What it is: Supplemental food program specifically for pregnant women, new mothers, and children under 5.

Who qualifies: Income at or below 185% of the poverty level. If you're already on Medicaid, SNAP, or TANF, you automatically qualify.

What you get: Specific healthy foods — milk, eggs, cheese, cereal, peanut butter, fruits and vegetables, baby formula. It's prescriptive (you can't just buy whatever), but it covers the nutritional basics for small humans and the people growing them.

How to apply: Find your local WIC office at fns.usda.gov/wic or call your state health department. Appointments are usually required.

Food Banks

What they are: Warehouses and distribution points that give away free groceries, no questions asked. Most have shifted to a "client choice" model where you pick what you want rather than getting a pre-packed box of random canned goods.

How to find one: Go to feedingamerica.org and enter your zip code. That'll show you every Feeding America-affiliated food bank and pantry near you. Many also distribute fresh produce, dairy, and meat — not just shelf-stable stuff.

How often: Most let you come once a week or twice a month. Some have no limits. Rules vary by location.

Real talk: If you feel weird about going to a food bank, know this — they exist specifically so people can use them. The volunteers are there because they want to help. Nobody is keeping score.

Community Fridges and Mutual Aid Food Networks

What they are: Refrigerators placed in public spaces, stocked by neighbors and local organizations. Take what you need, leave what you can. No signup, no paperwork, no eye contact required.

How to find them: Search "community fridge [your city]" or check freedge.org. Instagram and Facebook are honestly the best places to find local mutual aid food projects — search "mutual aid [your city]."

School Meal Programs

What they are: Free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch for kids in public schools. Many districts now offer free meals to all students regardless of income (thanks to the Community Eligibility Provision).

Summer feeding: When school's out, the USDA Summer Food Service Program keeps feeding kids. Text "FOOD" to 304-304 or call 1-866-348-6479 to find free summer meal sites near you.

How to apply: Fill out the form your kid's school sends home at the start of the year. If you're on SNAP or TANF, your kids may be automatically enrolled.

Housing

The most expensive problem to have, and the hardest to solve. But there are real programs.

Section 8 / Housing Choice Voucher Program

What it is: A federal voucher that pays a portion of your rent directly to your landlord. You pay roughly 30% of your income; the voucher covers the rest.

The reality: Waitlists are long. Sometimes years long. Some housing authorities close their lists entirely because demand so far outstrips supply. But you cannot get to the front of the list if you're not on the list. Apply now, even if the wait is brutal. Some housing authorities run lotteries when they open their lists, so watch for announcements.

How to apply: Contact your local Public Housing Authority (PHA). Find yours at hud.gov/program_offices/public_indian_housing/pha/cont

HUD Rental Assistance Programs

What they are: Various federal programs beyond Section 8 — public housing, project-based rental assistance, housing for elderly and disabled residents.

How to find what's available: Start at hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance or call HUD's helpline at 1-800-569-4287. They can direct you to programs specific to your situation and location.

LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program)

What it is: Federal money that helps pay your heating and cooling bills. Some states also cover water bills and weatherization (insulating your home so it costs less to heat).

When to apply: Before winter. Seriously. Funds are limited and first-come, first-served in many states. Applications typically open in October or November.

How to apply: Contact your state or local LIHEAP office. Find it at acf.hhs.gov/ocs/liheap-state-and-territory-contact-listing or — you guessed it — call 211.

Worth knowing: This one actually works, and the application is simpler than most. If your utility bill gives you heartburn every winter, apply.

Emergency Rental Assistance

What it is: Short-term help when you're behind on rent and facing eviction. Funding varies — sometimes federal, sometimes state, sometimes local nonprofits.

Where to start: 211.org or dial 2-1-1. They'll connect you to whatever emergency rental assistance is currently available in your area.

Also check: Your local Community Action Agency (find yours at communityactionpartnership.com). These are the "community action agencies" that government brochures love to mention without explaining — they're nonprofits that distribute federal and state aid for housing, energy, and other emergencies.

Habitat for Humanity

What it is: Long-term homeownership program. You put in "sweat equity" hours helping build homes, and Habitat sells you one at no profit with an affordable mortgage.

Timeline: This is not a quick fix. The application process takes months, and you'll invest hundreds of hours of labor. But if homeownership is your goal and you're willing to put in the work, this is one of the only programs that actually gets working-class people into houses they can afford.

How to apply: Find your local Habitat affiliate at habitat.org/find-your-local-habitat.

Healthcare

Being sick and broke is not a moral failing. Get the care.

Medicaid

What it is: Free or very-low-cost health insurance funded by the federal and state governments.

Who qualifies: It depends on your state. In states that expanded Medicaid under the ACA, adults earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level qualify (roughly $20,800/year for a single person). In states that didn't expand, eligibility is more restrictive — sometimes limited to parents, pregnant women, children, and people with disabilities.

How to apply: Go to healthcare.gov or your state's Medicaid website. You can apply year-round (Medicaid has no "open enrollment" period like marketplace insurance does).

Community Health Centers (Federally Qualified Health Centers)

What they are: Medical clinics that serve everyone regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. They use a sliding fee scale based on your income — meaning your bill is proportional to what you make. If you make very little, your bill is very little. Sometimes zero.

What they offer: Primary care, dental, mental health, substance abuse treatment, and pharmacy services. Many also offer vision care. This is real, comprehensive healthcare.

How to find one: Go to findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov and enter your address. There are over 1,400 health center organizations operating nearly 15,000 service sites across the country. There is almost certainly one near you.

Editorial note: Ignore the waiting rooms, ignore the fluorescent lighting. The care at these places is genuinely good. Many are staffed by doctors completing loan repayment programs — they're skilled and they're motivated.

Free and Low-Cost Clinics

What they are: Charitable clinics, often volunteer-staffed, that provide free or very cheap medical care.

How to find them: NeedyMeds.org maintains a database of free clinics searchable by zip code. FreeClinics.com is another directory. Your 211 line will also know what's available locally.

Cheap Prescriptions

$4 prescription programs: Walmart, Kroger, and several other pharmacies offer hundreds of generic medications for $4 per 30-day supply (or $10 for 90 days). You do NOT need a Walmart membership. You do NOT need insurance. You just need a prescription.

Costco pharmacy: Here's a secret — you do not need a Costco membership to use their pharmacy. Federal law requires them to fill prescriptions for non-members. Their prices are often the lowest around.

GoodRx: Free app/website that compares prescription prices at nearby pharmacies and gives you discount coupons. It won't work for every drug, but when it works, it can cut prices by 50-80%. No insurance required.

RxAssist (rxassist.org): Database of patient assistance programs run by pharmaceutical companies. If you're uninsured and need an expensive medication, the manufacturer may give it to you free or at steep discount. The paperwork is annoying. The savings can be enormous.

Mental Health

Open Path Collective (openpathcollective.org): Network of therapists who see clients for $30-$80 per session (one-time lifetime membership fee of $65). Real licensed therapists. Real therapy. Affordable.

NAMI Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264). National Alliance on Mental Illness. Free support, information, and referrals for anyone affected by mental illness.

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741. Free, 24/7 crisis counseling via text message. You don't have to be suicidal to use it — any crisis counts.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988. Available 24/7. If you're in crisis right now, use this.

Education and Credentials

Skills cost money to acquire — unless you know where to look.

Pell Grants

What it is: Free federal money for college or vocational training. Grants, not loans. You don't pay it back. Maximum award is over $7,000 per year.

Who qualifies: Students with financial need (generally, family income under ~$60,000, though it depends on family size and other factors). Fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) at studentaid.gov. Even if you're not sure you qualify, fill out the FAFSA — it costs nothing, and you might be surprised.

The fine print: The FAFSA has been simplified significantly. It's no longer the soul-crushing ordeal it used to be. Budget 30-45 minutes and have your tax return handy.

Community College Workforce Programs

What they are: Short-term certificate and training programs (often 6-16 weeks) in fields like welding, CDL driving, CNA/nursing, HVAC, IT support, and phlebotomy. Many are free or heavily subsidized through workforce development grants.

How to find them: Call your local community college and ask specifically about "non-credit workforce training" or "continuing education career programs." These are different from degree programs and move much faster.

Free Online Learning

Khan Academy (khanacademy.org): Completely free. Math, science, computing, economics, SAT prep, and more. No ads, no upsells. This is the real deal.

Coursera Financial Aid: Most Coursera courses can be taken for free if you apply for financial aid through the platform. Takes about 15 days to process, but gives you full access including certificates. Google Career Certificates (IT Support, Data Analytics, Project Management, UX Design) on Coursera are specifically designed to get you hired.

MIT OpenCourseWare (ocw.mit.edu): Free course materials from MIT. Lectures, notes, assignments. You don't get a degree, but you get the actual knowledge that MIT students get.

Job Corps

What it is: Free residential career training program for young people ages 16-24. You live there, you train in a skilled trade, and they help you find a job afterward. They also offer GED/high school diploma programs.

What it covers: Housing, meals, training, a living allowance, and job placement assistance. All free.

How to apply: Visit jobcorps.gov or call 1-800-733-JOBS (5627).

Worth knowing: This program is criminally under-known. If you're young and directionless, or if you know someone who is, look into it. It's one of the best workforce programs the federal government runs.

Employer-Sponsored Certification Programs

What they are: Many employers — especially in healthcare, trucking, and skilled trades — will pay for your training in exchange for a commitment to work for them for one to two years. Hospitals sponsor CNA and LPN training. Trucking companies fund CDL programs. Large retailers and warehouse operations sometimes cover forklift certification, OSHA training, or supply chain credentials.

How to find them: Ask your current employer's HR department what tuition assistance or certification programs they offer. Many workers never ask, and many programs go underused. If your current employer doesn't offer anything, target employers who do — search job boards for phrases like "training provided," "will train the right candidate," or "tuition reimbursement." State workforce development boards (see below) also maintain lists of employers with sponsored training programs.

The catch: Read the commitment contract carefully. Some employer-sponsored programs include "clawback" clauses requiring you to repay training costs if you leave before the commitment period ends. Know what you're signing. A two-year commitment is reasonable. A five-year commitment with a $10,000 repayment penalty is a trap.

Apprenticeship.gov

What it is: A federal portal connecting you to registered apprenticeship programs across the country. You earn a paycheck while you train — no student debt, no classroom-only limbo.

Industries: Construction, manufacturing, IT, healthcare, energy, culinary, and more. These aren't dead-end gigs. Registered apprenticeships lead to industry-recognized credentials.

How to find one: Visit apprenticeship.gov and search by location, occupation, or industry.

State Workforce Development Boards

What they are: Every state has a workforce development system with local "American Job Centers" (sometimes called "career centers" or "one-stop centers"). They offer free career counseling, resume help, interview prep, and — critically — training funds. Many can pay for you to get a certificate or credential through something called an Individual Training Account (ITA).

How to find yours: Visit careeronestop.org or call 1-877-872-5627.

Public Libraries

I cannot stress this enough: your library card is one of the most valuable financial tools you own.

Free internet and computers. Free access to LinkedIn Learning (formerly Lynda.com) — thousands of professional courses. Free printing and scanning at many branches. Free e-books and audiobooks. Free museum passes in many cities. Free tax preparation assistance during tax season. Meeting rooms. Air conditioning. A quiet place to apply for jobs.

Get a library card. Use it relentlessly.

Emergency Cash

When you need money by Friday and payday is next Thursday.

211

Dial 2-1-1. Text your zip code to 898-211. Visit 211.org. The person who answers can tell you what emergency financial assistance exists in your area right now — rental help, utility shutoff prevention, food, transportation, prescriptions. This is always your first call.

Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul Society

Both organizations provide emergency financial assistance for rent, utilities, and other critical bills. Availability and amounts vary by location. You typically need to visit in person and bring documentation of the bill you need help with.

How to find them: Salvation Army — salvationarmyusa.org. St. Vincent de Paul — svdpusa.org. Or call 211 and ask.

Modest Needs (modestneeds.org)

What it is: A nonprofit that provides small grants (usually $500-$1,500) to people experiencing a temporary financial crisis. The philosophy is simple: a small amount of money at the right moment can prevent a much larger catastrophe.

Who qualifies: Working people who are above the poverty line but still can't absorb an unexpected expense. This fills a gap that most other programs don't — you make "too much" for traditional assistance but not enough to handle a $900 car repair.

How to apply: Apply online at modestneeds.org. Applications are reviewed by other community members.

Mutual Aid Networks

What they are: Neighbor-to-neighbor support networks. People pooling resources to help each other with groceries, rent, medical bills, transportation, and more. No bureaucracy, no eligibility requirements.

How to find one: Search "mutual aid [your city]" on social media. Check mutualaidhub.org. Ask at your local community center, church, mosque, or library.

TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families)

What it is: Monthly cash assistance for families with children. Also provides job training and support services.

Who qualifies: Very low-income families with children. Income limits and benefit amounts vary dramatically by state (and are, frankly, insultingly low in some states).

How to apply: Through your state's DHHS or social services office. You can find your state's program at acf.hhs.gov/ofa/help.

Real talk: TANF is chronically underused. Many families who qualify never apply because they don't know it exists or assume they won't qualify. Check anyway.

Legal Aid

You have rights even when you're broke. Especially when you're broke.

Legal Services Corporation (LSC)

What it is: The single largest funder of civil legal aid in the country. LSC-funded programs provide free legal help to low-income Americans in every state.

What they cover: Eviction defense, domestic violence protection, consumer fraud, benefits disputes, family law, immigration, and more. They do NOT handle criminal cases.

How to find help: Visit lsc.gov/what-legal-aid/find-legal-aid or call your local legal aid organization.

LawHelp.org

What it is: A state-by-state directory of free legal help. Enter your state, describe your issue, and it points you to legal aid organizations that handle your type of case.

Tenant Rights Organizations

What they are: Nonprofits that specifically help renters fight illegal evictions, recover security deposits, force landlords to make repairs, and navigate tenant law.

How to find one: Search "tenant rights [your city/state]" or ask 211. Many legal aid organizations have dedicated housing units.

The fine print: If you're facing eviction, do not assume you have to leave. Many evictions are handled illegally. A tenant rights lawyer — even a free one — can often buy you time, reduce what you owe, or get the case dismissed outright.

VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance)

What it is: Free tax preparation by IRS-certified volunteers for people earning roughly $67,000 or less. They handle standard returns — W-2 income, EITC claims, child tax credits.

When: January through April, at community centers, libraries, churches, and schools.

How to find a site: Visit irs.gov/vita or call 1-800-906-9887.

Real talk: If you're paying someone to do a simple tax return, stop. VITA does it for free, and they're specifically trained to make sure you're claiming every credit you're entitled to — including the EITC (see Financial Tools below).

Benefits Navigation

The system is confusing on purpose. These tools help you cut through it.

Benefits.gov

What it is: A federal website that lets you answer questions about your situation and shows you every federal benefit program you might qualify for. It covers over 1,000 programs across all agencies.

BenefitsCheckUp (benefitscheckup.org)

What it is: Run by the National Council on Aging, specifically designed for adults 55 and older. Screens for benefits related to healthcare, prescriptions, food, utilities, tax relief, and more.

Your Local 211

I've said it before and I'm saying it again: 211 is the most underused resource in America. The people who answer these calls are trained navigators who know what exists in your specific zip code. They can help you apply for multiple programs in one conversation. Call 2-1-1. Visit 211.org. Save the number in your phone right now.

State DHHS Offices

What they are: Your state's Department of Health and Human Services (sometimes called Department of Social Services, Department of Human Services, or some other variation). This is the one-stop shop for applying to Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and other state-administered benefits.

Pro tip: Many states now let you apply for multiple programs with a single application. One visit, one form, multiple benefits. Ask the intake worker to screen you for everything.

Transportation

The thing that gets you to the job that gets you the money. Don't underestimate this one.

Vehicle Repair Assistance

What it is: Several nonprofits and community organizations help low-income people pay for car repairs, because the people who design social services eventually figured out that a $400 repair is cheaper than a $12,000/year loss of income when someone can't get to work.

Where to look: - **211**: Your first call, as always. They know what's available locally. - **Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul**: Both sometimes cover emergency car repairs. Amounts and availability vary by location. - **Working Cars for Working People** and similar local programs: Many cities have nonprofits that provide free or low-cost car repairs for people who need a vehicle for work. Search "car repair assistance [your city]" or ask 211. - **Modest Needs** (modestneeds.org): The same organization listed under Emergency Cash — they'll fund car repairs if that's the crisis preventing your financial stability.

Donated Vehicle Programs

What they are: Nonprofits that accept donated vehicles and give them (free or very cheap) to people who need reliable transportation for work.

How to find them: 1-800-Charity Cars (800charitycars.org), Working Cars for Working People, and local Goodwill or Salvation Army chapters sometimes run vehicle programs. Your local Community Action Agency may know of others.

Reality check: Waitlists can be long and vehicle quality varies. But a free car with some miles on it beats no car at all.

Public Transit Discounts

What they are: Many transit agencies offer reduced-fare programs for low-income riders. Some are 50% off, some are free.

How to find them: Check your local transit authority's website for "reduced fare," "low-income," or "equity" programs. In some cities, you can get a discounted pass just by showing proof of income or enrollment in SNAP/Medicaid.

Other Transportation Resources

- **Rides to medical appointments**: Medicaid covers non-emergency medical transportation in most states. If you're on Medicaid and can't get to a doctor, call your Medicaid plan and ask about transportation benefits. Many people don't know this exists.
- **Employer vanpools and commuter benefits**: Some employers, especially in suburban areas, offer vanpool programs or transit subsidies. Ask HR.
- **Bike co-ops**: Community bike shops that offer free or low-cost refurbished bicycles and teach you to maintain them. Search "bike co-op [your city]." Not a car, but for short commutes, a free bike changes the math.

Childcare

The cost that makes every other cost harder. If you can't afford childcare, you can't afford to work. If you can't work, you can't afford childcare. Here's how to break the loop.

Head Start and Early Head Start

What it is: Free comprehensive early childhood education for children from birth to age 5 in low-income families. Head Start serves 3- to 5-year-olds; Early Head Start serves infants, toddlers, and pregnant women.

What you get: Free preschool education, meals, health screenings, dental check-ups, and family support services. Many programs offer full-day, full-year schedules that align with work hours.

Who qualifies: Families at or below 100% of the federal poverty level. Families experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or receiving TANF or SSI are categorically eligible.

How to apply: Visit eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc or call 1-866-763-6481 to find a program near you. Apply early — waitlists are common.

CCDF (Child Care and Development Fund) / Child Care Subsidies

What it is: Federal block grants administered by states that help low-income families pay for childcare. You choose the provider (daycare center, family childcare home, or even a qualifying relative). The subsidy covers most or all of the cost.

Who qualifies: Working families (or those in training/education) with income generally below 85% of the state median income, though each state sets its own limit. Priority is given to very low-income families and children with special needs.

How to apply: Contact your state's childcare assistance office. Find yours at childcare.gov or call 1-800-616-2242. Application processes vary by state.

The reality: Like Section 8, demand often outstrips supply. Waitlists exist. Get on them. And know that some states have recently expanded eligibility and funding — what was unavailable a year ago may be open now.

Other Childcare Resources

- **State Pre-K programs**: Many states now offer free or subsidized preschool for 4-year-olds (some include 3-year-olds). Check with your local school district.
- **YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs**: Many offer sliding-scale before-and-after-school care and summer programs. Fees are income-based.
- **Military childcare**: If you're active duty or a veteran, military childcare programs often have significantly lower costs and shorter waitlists than civilian options.
- **Childcare.gov**: The federal portal for finding and paying for childcare. Includes a provider search tool and information about financial assistance in your state.
- **Dependent Care FSA**: If your employer offers a Flexible Spending Account for dependent care, you can set aside up to $5,000/year pre-tax for childcare. This only helps if you have the cash flow, but it reduces your tax burden.

Editorial note: Childcare in America costs more than in-state college tuition in most states. That's not your fault. It's a policy failure. Use every program available while pushing for the system to change.

Financial Tools

Money management advice usually assumes you have money to manage. These tools actually work at low balances.

No-Fee Bank Accounts

The problem: Traditional banks charge monthly fees, overdraft fees, and minimum balance requirements that punish people for being poor.

The fix: - **Credit unions**: Not-for-profit financial institutions owned by their members. Almost all offer free checking with no minimums. Find one at mycreditunion.gov. - **Chime**: Online bank, no monthly fees, no minimum balance, no overdraft fees. Early direct deposit. The app is decent. - **Varo**: Similar to Chime. No fees, no minimums, early direct deposit. - **Bank On certified accounts**: A

national certification for safe, affordable bank accounts. Find participating banks at joinbankon.org.

Micro-Saving Tools

What works: Automatic round-up features (Chime, Acorns) that save your spare change. The amounts are tiny, but tiny adds up.

What doesn't work (at low income): Any app that charges monthly fees on small balances, pushes you toward investments you don't understand, or makes it hard to withdraw your money when you need it. If you can't get your $47 back in 24 hours without a penalty, it's not a savings tool — it's a trap.

Free Credit Monitoring

Credit Karma (creditkarma.com): Free credit scores, free credit monitoring, free credit reports. They make money by recommending financial products to you — just ignore the ads and use the free tools.

AnnualCreditReport.com: The only federally authorized source for free credit reports from all three bureaus (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion). You can check weekly for free. Do this at least once a year. Dispute any errors — they drag your score down for no reason.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

What it is: A refundable tax credit for low-to-moderate income workers. "Refundable" means that even if you owe zero in taxes, you get the money. It's not a deduction — it's cash back from the IRS.

How much: Depending on your income and number of children, the EITC can be worth up to $7,830 for the 2025 tax year. Even workers without children can receive a smaller credit.

Who misses it: Millions of eligible people every year, often because they don't file a tax return (you have to file to claim it, even if you're not required to file), or because they don't know it exists.

How to claim it: File your tax return. That's it. If you use VITA (see Legal Aid above), they'll make sure you claim it. If you file yourself, use IRS Free File (irs.gov/freefile) for free tax software.

Editorial note: The EITC is the single largest cash transfer program for working families in the United States. If you work and earn under roughly $63,000 with kids (or under about $18,000 without

kids), check your eligibility. This is money the government specifically set aside for people like you. Take it.

The Child Tax Credit (CTC)

What it is: A tax credit worth up to $2,000 per qualifying child under 17. A portion (up to $1,700 for 2025) is refundable — meaning you get it back as cash even if you owe no taxes.

Who qualifies: Most families with children earning under $200,000 (single) or $400,000 (married). At this book's target income levels, you almost certainly qualify if you have kids.

How to claim it: File your tax return. Like the EITC, VITA preparers will make sure you claim it. The CTC and EITC stack — a working single parent with two kids earning $25,000 could receive both credits, totaling $5,000-$8,000 in refunds.

Editorial note: The CTC has been expanded and contracted by Congress multiple times. Check current amounts at irs.gov/credits-deductions/individuals/child-tax-credit. Whatever the current version is, claim it.

State Earned Income Credits

What they are: Over 30 states (plus DC and some cities) have their own earned income tax credits that supplement the federal EITC. These range from 3% to 85% of your federal EITC amount — potentially hundreds to thousands of additional dollars.

How to claim: If your state has one, it's typically included in your state tax return. VITA preparers handle this automatically. To check if your state has one, search "state EITC [your state]" or visit eitc.irs.gov.

SSI (Supplemental Security Income)

What it is: Monthly cash assistance for people who are aged (65+), blind, or disabled and have very limited income and resources. Administered by the Social Security Administration — not the same as Social Security retirement or SSDI.

How much: Maximum federal benefit is approximately $943/month for an individual (2024). Many states add a supplement.

Who qualifies: Individuals with limited income and resources (generally under $2,000 in assets, though some assets like your home don't count) who are aged, blind, or disabled.

How to apply: Visit ssa.gov/ssi, call 1-800-772-1213, or visit your local Social Security office.

Real talk: If you're on SSI and considering working, read Chapter 8's section on the benefits cliff carefully. SSI reduces benefits as you earn income, but there are work incentive programs (like PASS and Ticket to Work) that can help you transition without losing everything at once.

Domestic Violence Resources

If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) or text START to 88788. Available 24/7, in 200+ languages. They can help with safety planning, local shelter referrals, and legal advocacy.

TheHotline.org: Online chat available if calling isn't safe.

Why this is in a financial book: Financial abuse is one of the primary tools of domestic violence — controlling access to money, running up debt in your name, preventing you from working, or sabotaging your employment. If someone is controlling your finances as a means of controlling you, that is abuse, and the resources above can help you build a safe exit plan. Many DV organizations also provide emergency financial assistance, housing support, and help rebuilding credit.

One More Thing

None of these programs will make you rich. None of them will fix the structural problems that make it so expensive to be poor. But they can keep food on the table, a roof over your head, and the lights on while you figure out the next move.

The hardest part of any of this is starting. Pick one thing from this list — just one — and do it today. Call 211. Fill out a SNAP application. Download GoodRx. Get a library card. One thing.

You're not gaming the system by using these programs. You're using the system. That's what it's there for.

Now go use it.

Appendix C: What to Say When Someone Tells You to "Just Budget Better"

A Glossary of Unhelpful Financial Advice, Translated for People Who Are Actually Broke

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If you've ever been poor around someone who isn't, you've heard the advice. It comes from coworkers, relatives, cable news hosts, personal finance influencers with ring lights and no rent — well-meaning or otherwise, they all have opinions about what you should be doing with money you don't have.

This appendix is for you. Consider it a field guide. A decoder ring. A laminated card you can pull out at Thanksgiving when your uncle who inherited his house starts lecturing you about fiscal responsibility.

Every entry follows the same format: the advice as spoken, what the advice-giver thinks they're saying, and what it actually sounds like when your checking account has eleven dollars in it.

You're welcome.

"Just budget better."

What they think it means: You haven't yet discovered the magic of tracking your spending in a spreadsheet. Once you see where your money goes, you'll find all this hidden waste and redirect it toward prosperity.

What it actually means when you're broke: You should arrange your insufficient money more neatly. The problem isn't the amount

— it's the *organization*. You're not drowning, you're just swimming wrong. Try drowning in columns.

The real move: Budgeting is genuinely useful — but only after you've acknowledged that no spreadsheet can manufacture money that doesn't exist. A budget is a tool for allocation, not a spell for conjuring income.

"Pay yourself first."

What they think it means: Before you pay any bills, set aside a portion of your paycheck for savings. Future You will thank Present You.

What it actually means when you're broke: Stiff the electric company so you can put forty dollars in a savings account that earns 0.03% interest. Future You will thank Present You from the dark apartment.

The real move: If you can save anything, save it. But the people who coined this phrase were not choosing between savings deposits and keeping the heat on. "Pay yourself first" was written by people whose bills were already paid.

"Stop buying lattes."

What they think it means: Small daily purchases add up. That $5 coffee is $1,825 a year! Imagine what you could do with that!

What it actually means when you're broke: Your poverty is caused by the single small pleasure you allow yourself between a job that doesn't pay enough and a home you can barely afford. The latte is the load-bearing wall of your financial ruin, apparently.

The real move: A $5 latte every workday is roughly $1,300 a year. Your rent went up $2,400. We are not dealing with the same numbers.

"Live below your means."

What they think it means: Spend less than you earn. Simple, timeless, elegant.

What it actually means when you're broke: Your means are $2,100 a month and your rent is $1,400. Living below your means is called "not eating the last week of the month." You're already doing it. You've been doing it. You could teach a masterclass.

The real move: The principle isn't wrong — spending less than you earn is how wealth accumulates. The problem is that it assumes

income exceeds survival costs, which for millions of people it doesn't. If you're already below your means and still broke, the lever to pull is income, not further deprivation.

"Build a six-month emergency fund."

What they think it means: Save enough to cover six months of expenses so you're protected against unexpected job loss or crisis.

What it actually means when you're broke: Simply set aside $15,000 to $25,000 on an income where you're regularly choosing between the phone bill and groceries. Should take about four hundred years at your current savings rate, assuming no further emergencies — which, historically speaking, is not how emergencies work.

The real move: Any emergency fund is better than none. Even $500 changes the math on a bad month. Start there. Ignore anyone who makes you feel like a failure for not having six months of expenses in liquid savings while you're living paycheck to paycheck.

"Invest early and let compound interest work for you."

What they think it means: Time in the market beats timing the market. Start investing in your twenties and you'll be a millionaire by retirement.

What it actually means when you're broke: You should have started investing money you didn't have twenty years ago. This is your fault for spending your twenties paying for things like "rent" and "food" and "the student loans you took out so you could get the job that doesn't pay you enough to invest." Compound interest is doing incredible work for the people who already had money. It will get to you eventually. Sincerely, Math.

The real move: Compound interest is real, and starting late is still better than not starting. Once you have a $500 buffer and your highest-interest debt is dead, even $25/month in a Roth IRA begins building something. The math won't look like the charts in the finance books, because those charts started at 22 with no debt. Your chart starts when it starts. It still works.

"Just get a better job."

What they think it means: You're underemployed. Surely there's a higher-paying position out there if you just look for it.

What it actually means when you're broke: Simply waltz into the Better Job Store, where they hand you a position that pays more

money, has benefits, doesn't conflict with your second job or your childcare schedule, and is accessible by the bus routes that actually exist. Why didn't you think of this before? Were you just… not wanting more money?

The real move: Job mobility is real, but it requires time, money, credentials, transportation, childcare, and energy — resources that poverty actively depletes. "Get a better job" is a destination, not directions.

"Have you tried cutting back on subscriptions?"

What they think it means: You're probably hemorrhaging money on streaming services, gym memberships, and subscription boxes you forgot about.

What it actually means when you're broke: Your $15.99 Netflix account — the one shared by four people, the one that constitutes your entire entertainment budget, the last tether to feeling like a human being who participates in culture — *that's* the problem. Cancel it. Stare at the wall. You've been entertained enough.

The real move: Audit your subscriptions, sure. But if the total comes to $40 a month and your shortfall is $600, you have not located the problem. You've located a scapegoat.

"You should be putting 15% into retirement."

What they think it means: Financial experts agree: 15% of your gross income into a 401(k) or IRA is the golden number for a comfortable retirement.

What it actually means when you're broke: Take 15% of your already-insufficient paycheck and lock it in a box you can't open for thirty years. Yes, you'll pay a penalty to access it early. Yes, the early access penalty exists specifically to punish people who turned out to need the money. The system is working as designed.

The real move: If your employer matches any percentage of your 401(k), contribute at least enough to capture the full match — that's free money, and walking past it costs you. Beyond the match, start where you can: 1%, 2%, whatever doesn't threaten your ability to eat. Increase by 1% every time you get a raise. You won't notice 1%. Over a decade, those increments matter.

"Buy in bulk to save money."

What they think it means: Costco! Unit prices! Buying the 48-pack is cheaper per item than buying the 6-pack!

What it actually means when you're broke: Spend $60 you don't have now to save $8 over the next three months. This is the famous "boots theory" of economics — it's expensive to be poor. Also, you need a Costco membership ($65), a car to get to Costco (Costco famously does not appear on bus routes), and a place to *store* 48 rolls of paper towels in your 500-square-foot apartment. Bulk buying is a discount available exclusively to people who already have money, storage, and transportation. But sure — you're the problem for buying the small bottle of laundry detergent at the corner store.

The real move: Where bulk buying actually works at low income: split a warehouse run with a friend or neighbor. Buy only non-perishables you're certain you'll use. And skip the membership entirely — Amazon Subscribe & Save and store-brand bulk options at regular grocery stores can close the unit-price gap without the upfront membership or the SUV-sized shopping trip. The savings are real but smaller than the Costco evangelists claim.

"Cook at home more."

What they think it means: Meal prep! Grocery shop with a list! A home-cooked meal costs a fraction of eating out!

What it actually means when you're broke: You, the person working two jobs on staggered schedules with forty-five minutes between shifts, should find time to plan, shop for, prepare, cook, and clean up meals from scratch. In the kitchen in your apartment that has two burners and no counter space. With the groceries you transported on foot. After your eleven-hour day. It'll be fun! Think of it as a hobby!

The real move: Cooking at home genuinely does save money when you have the time, equipment, and energy. Those are real prerequisites, not excuses. Rice and beans is a strategy, not a lifestyle aspiration.

"Just move somewhere cheaper."

What they think it means: Your city is expensive. There are affordable places to live if you're willing to relocate.

What it actually means when you're broke: Uproot your life, leave your job, abandon your support network, pull your kids out of school, and move to a place with lower rent and also lower wages, fewer jobs,

and no public transit — so you can be poor in a new zip code where you don't know anyone. First month, last month, security deposit, moving costs, and time off work to move: let's call it $4,000 to $6,000. Which you will pull from the emergency fund you also don't have. The math is mathing.

The real move: Geographic arbitrage is real — but only if you research jobs before apartments. Chapter 9 walks through the full math: when a move saves you money, when it costs you your support network, and how to tell the difference before you're stuck in a cheap town with no way to earn.

"Have you considered a side hustle?"

What they think it means: Monetize a skill! Drive for Uber! Sell crafts on Etsy! Passive income!

What it actually means when you're broke: You have too much free time. The solution to not being paid enough at your job is to get a second job — but we're going to call it a "hustle" so it sounds entrepreneurial instead of exhausting. Rebrand your desperation as ambition. #GrindCulture. Also, "passive income" means money that comes in while you sleep, which is exclusively generated by money you already have. The word "passive" is doing incredible heavy lifting in that sentence.

The real move: Side income is real and sometimes necessary. But a society where full-time work doesn't cover basic expenses is not a society with a "hustle gap." It's a society with a wage problem.

"You need to build your credit."

What they think it means: A good credit score unlocks lower interest rates, better apartments, and financial freedom.

What it actually means when you're broke: You need to go into debt in order to prove that you're trustworthy enough to go into more debt on slightly better terms. Open a credit card. Spend money on it. Pay it off immediately with the money you could have just spent directly. Do this dance for several years. Congratulations: you now have a number that determines whether you deserve housing. This is a normal system that makes sense.

The real move: Credit scores are absurd, and they are also real. A secured credit card ($200 deposit, use it for one recurring bill, pay it off monthly) builds credit without requiring you to go into debt. Pull your free report at AnnualCreditReport.com and dispute

anything wrong — 25% of reports have errors, and errors at your income level are the kind that block housing and jobs. Build the score not because the system is fair, but because it's the system.

"The rich and the poor have the same 24 hours."

What they think it means: Time is the great equalizer. It's all about how you use it.

What it actually means when you're broke: The CEO who has a driver, a personal chef, a nanny, a housekeeper, and an assistant has the same 24 hours as the single parent working two jobs, commuting by bus, doing their own cooking, cleaning, childcare, and laundry. Absolutely identical situations. The CEO simply *chose* to use their 24 hours more wisely — by hiring other people to do eight hours' worth of their daily tasks. Time is money, and money is time, and if you don't have money, you don't have time. They just told on themselves and didn't notice.

The real move: You can't buy back time the way the CEO does, but you can audit where yours goes (Chapter 4's time-map exercise) and claw back 3-5 hours a week from low-value sinks — batching errands, automating bills, converting dead commute time into learning via free podcasts or library audiobooks. Those hours won't make the day longer. They'll make it more yours.

"You just need to want it bad enough."

What they think it means: Success is about drive and determination. The hungry succeed.

What it actually means when you're broke: You — the person working mandatory overtime, skipping meals, patching your tires instead of replacing them, choosing which bills to pay this month like it's a Sophie's Choice of utilities — simply do not *want* financial security enough. Your desire is insufficient. Have you tried wanting harder? Maybe you could want so hard that your landlord lowers your rent. Peak wanting could probably fix the transmission on your car. You're just not wanting at the right frequency.

The real move: Desire isn't the bottleneck — resources are. Replace "want it more" with "identify the single next concrete step that moves the needle" and then figure out what it costs in time, money, and energy. That's a plan. Wanting is not a plan.

"Have you tried Dave Ramsey?"

What they think it means: Dave Ramsey's debt snowball method and envelope system have helped millions get out of debt.

What it actually means when you're broke: A man who went bankrupt, rebuilt his wealth through a media empire, and now earns tens of millions of dollars a year telling poor people to cut up their credit cards would like you to know that your problem is discipline. His advice assumes you have a household income north of $50,000, a spouse, and debts that are the result of lifestyle choices rather than medical emergencies or structural poverty. If your debt is from a surgery or from simply existing while poor, the envelope system will not save you. But the envelopes are pretty.

The real move: Some of Ramsey's basic principles work for people who are in debt from overspending relative to a decent income. If that's you, fine. If you're in debt because your income doesn't cover your existence, no budgeting framework built for the middle class will solve that. You don't need a debt snowball. You need a raise, a policy change, or a windfall — and two of those aren't up to you.

"Set up automatic transfers to savings."

What they think it means: Automate your finances so saving is effortless. You won't even miss the money.

What it actually means when you're broke: Set up an automatic transfer so your bank can automatically charge you a $35 overdraft fee when the timing doesn't line up with your paycheck. Automation is a fantastic tool for people whose accounts always have a buffer. For people who are regularly near zero, it's a trap with a fee attached. Nothing says "financial wellness" like paying the bank $35 for the privilege of trying to save $25.

The real move: Automation can work at low balances — but only if you do it right. Use a no-fee bank (Chime, Varo, or a credit union) that won't charge overdraft fees. Set the transfer for the day *after* your paycheck hits, not a fixed date. Start absurdly small — $2 or $3 per paycheck. The amount doesn't matter; the habit does. And if a bad month hits, skip it without guilt. The goal is a system that helps when things are stable and doesn't punish you when they're not.

"Negotiate your bills."

What they think it means: Call your cable company, your insurance provider, your credit card issuer. Ask for a lower rate. The worst they can say is no!

What it actually means when you're broke: Spend two and a half hours on hold during your one day off, navigate seven phone menus, explain your situation to four different representatives, get transferred twice, get disconnected once, call back, and ultimately receive a $11/month discount that will expire in three months and automatically revert to the higher rate unless you do this again. Your time, if it were billable, just cost you $200 to save $33. But yes — you should definitely be doing this instead of resting.

The real move: Negotiate exactly one bill — the one with the highest potential savings. Car insurance and medical bills have the most room. For insurance, get two competing quotes online (20 minutes) and call your current provider with the number in hand. For medical bills, call billing and say "I can't afford this — what are my options?" Hospitals especially will often cut 20-40% or set up zero-interest payment plans. Pick your battle. Win it. Move on.

"Just stop being poor."

What they think it means: No one actually says this.

What it actually means when you're broke: Everyone says this. They just use more words. Every piece of advice in this appendix, stripped to its honest core, is a more palatable version of this sentence. Budget better. Want it more. Cut the latte. Get a side hustle. All of it circles the same drain: the belief that poverty is a series of personal failures rather than a structural condition, and that the solution lives in individual behavior rather than systemic change. "Stop being poor" is just the version that's too honest to say out loud. Every other version is the same sentence in business casual.

A Final Word

The best financial advice for people who are broke is advice that starts by acknowledging you're broke — not advice that assumes you have resources you don't, time you can't spare, or options that don't exist in your zip code. Good advice meets you where you are. Everything else is just a more expensive way of saying "have you tried not having this problem?"

You're not bad with money. You're in a bad situation with money. There's a difference, and every piece of advice that ignores that difference isn't really advice at all. It's just judgment wearing a blazer.

If someone hits you with any of the lines in this appendix, you now have a glossary of exactly what they're really saying. Use it wisely. Or screenshot it and send it to them. Either way.

But before you do that: keep going. You know more about surviving on less than any financial guru with a podcast. That's not a consolation prize — it's expertise.