

## TALKING THE WALK

# Hart, Mind and Soul

Episode 33 | Will Van Der Hart

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Imagine you're facing a seemingly metaphorical mountain: some change in your life that seems insurmountable. How do you approach it?

Are you a **dreamer**, who simply imagines life on the other side of the mountain and pay no attention to the pain that getting there may cause you or others in your life?

Perhaps you're a **driver**. You look pain in the face and say, 'Bring it on!' And if you're having to change one thing, why not change the whole lot while you're at it?

Maybe you're a **driller**. You're happy to engage with the present moment as long as you can analyse it for all it's worth.

Or is being a **drifter** more your thing? You turn your back on the mountain and tell yourself that everything's going to be okay, hoping that one day you'll wake up and, somehow, you'll have made it to the other side.

Each approach has its pros and cons, says the Reverend Will Van Der Hart<sup>1</sup>, guest on episode 33 of the All Terrain podcast. But when we're facing change, 'the greatest help comes when we can collaborate in change and appreciate each other's approaches, and encourage one another to think in different ways about what we're going through.'

## Back-breaking

Will's insurmountable mountain came when he broke his back in 2016.

A self-confessed 'exercise addict', Will's back injury was progressive, developed as a result of years of rowing and running, until he finally blew up a disc in his back while trampolining with his kids. After emergency surgery his surgeon told him he could never run again, and although Will was grateful not to be in pain any more, it was a tough blow to Will's identity. 'I literally wanted to stick my leg out and trip over runners on the towpath to stop them from running, because it wasn't fair that I was not allowed to run. I struggled to deal with all my anger and frustration. It was almost like a bereavement.'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.willvanderhart.com/>

## Mentally fit

Surviving a broken back – as well as a strong Christian faith – is something he has in common with adventurer Bear Grylls, who broke three vertebrae in 1996 when his parachute failed to inflate.

Together they wrote *Mind Fuel* to help people build day-to-day mental resilience. Covering nearly 200 mental fitness topics, it equips readers for life's daily challenges, building self-awareness, resilience and confidence.

'We wanted to write a book for people who would never ever pick up a self-help book even if it jumped on their heads,' explains Will.

'I can't abide tokenism, and I started my foundation<sup>2</sup> to try and help the church become more realistic about mental and emotional health issues. We didn't need anyone else saying: "Don't worry: just pray about it and you won't be depressed. Jesus is the answer to your pain!"

'We needed someone saying, "Actually you're in agony, and you need medication – potentially, psychological therapies. You need support and understanding."

'So the last thing we ever wanted *Mind Fuel* to be was a sort of book of trite, pithy sayings.'

## Your relationship with pain

When host Jo Taylor asks Will how he moves through suffering, he challenges the premise.

'*Should* you move through suffering?

'On the one hand, there are things we *need* to accommodate as far as pain and suffering is concerned. When I'm supporting people who are going through extreme suffering, I so often find they also have a terror of trying to break away from that suffering itself. But the long-term consequences of addiction are far greater than the temporary pain of getting free from addiction. The short-term pain of leaving an abusive relationship seems huge, but it's better than the lifelong suffering of staying in it.

'So I'm wanting to encourage people to think about some things in life that, while very painful, are also the first step necessary to find a greater healing and a greater freedom from suffering.

'But there are also things that we *shouldn't* accommodate as far as pain and suffering is concerned.

'I went to see a pain specialist and I asked him how to get rid of my chronic pain. And he said, "Well, we need to change your relationship to pain." And so we did some mindfulness style exercises, and I began to change my relationship to the pain I felt, and to localise it, which over time made it pinpoint pain rather than pain everywhere. And actually, I haven't actually taken the paracetamol for back pain in five years, because of some work I did with this pain therapist.'

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<sup>2</sup> The Mind and Soul Foundation, <https://www.mindandsoulfoundation.org/>

## Joy is all in your head

'Imagine each of us is like a traditional transceiver radio with a unique frequency. The world is transmitting joy all the time – and, more importantly, the Lord is transmitting joy all the time. But whether we tune into the joy that is available to us is an entirely different question.

'Most people say things like “When my circumstances change, then I'll find joy: when I get my GCSE results, A-level results, degree or first job, then I will feel joy.” And what they're doing is premeditating a time in which they feel joy, because they believe that it's circumstantial.

'But actually joy is not circumstantial, but dispositional. When the apostle Paul says, “I've learned the secret to be content in any circumstance”, all the circumstances he mentions were actually miserable: shipwrecks, nakedness, imprisonment, threats, hunger. All the circumstances we would most likely *not* experience joy are the ones where Paul says he found kind of joy and contentment.'

## Give and you shall receive

Will talks about a member of his church, Jim, who works as a wealth manager for a big city bank. One of his ridiculously wealthy clients asked him to give away all of his money this year: he had hundreds of millions.

'So Jim set about trying to give away his money to all sorts of amazing charitable causes and churches and people. But what was amazing about this guy's account, is that the more they gave away his money, the more money his investments doubled up. And Jim said, “I've never known anything like it. Someone so full of joy and gratitude, and so generous, it can only be God.”'

But generosity needn't be about monetary wealth: 'Generosity is about the time you spend on your friends, the note you write to your mum, the encouragement you give to the school cleaner or the bus conductor, the kind words you say to the person who looks like they're struggling. Be generous, and you'll find joy.'

## Years and ears

Will shares two pieces of wisdom about how to mature in service.

The first is to persist in service, even when – especially when – it doesn't sound very exciting. 'A life of service might sound like a life of boredom, drabness, drowsiness and overextension. But actually, we're called to the great joy of serving one another.'

The second? 'One of the key questions to ask to grow and mature in service of others is, 'How can I support you right now? What can I do? How do you want me to be with you on this issue?'

'When I was at school, we did soup runs with The Salvation Army. I remember one cold night in November on The Strand, and I had this nice leather trench coat which I was determined to give to someone. There was this guy who was wearing a pair of trousers that were ripped up to the knee, and

the skinniest T-shirt. When I saw him I said, “I’ve got this lovely warm coat for you to wear.” And he said, “I don’t want your coat.” And then I got into this conversation with him where I was desperately trying to give him the coat that I had decided he needed, and I could see him getting more and more upset about the fact that I was trying to offer him. I felt moved by his nakedness and his suffering – and he felt annoyed by my position.

‘And he didn’t take the coat, but I always remember the interaction. My service that night was an imposition, out of the context of relationship.

‘And so if you want to serve well, you have to love well first – and that comes from being willing to just be alongside and listen.’

## Questions for reflection

-  *Dreamer, driver, driller or drifter: which are you, in terms of how you approach change? What are the pros and cons of that approach?*
-  *Will’s identity had to change overnight when he broke his back. Has any major change ever forced you to leave part of who you were behind? What was it like? How did you get through it?*
-  *If you have experienced miraculous answers to prayer, what do you do when God doesn’t seem to answer other prayers? If you haven’t, how does it feel when you’re going through something tough and other Christians give you advice to ‘just pray about it’?*
-  *When might allowing yourself to feel temporary pain help you avoid long-term suffering? Can you think of other types of pain that people often put up with but that they could seek freedom from?*
-  *Will says joy is dispositional: How do you make joy a mindset? How do you think the apostle Paul was able to find contentment when his circumstances suggested he should be miserable?*
-  *Have you ever tried being really generous? What happened? How did you feel? How could you be more generous with your resources (money, time, words or actions)?*
-  *Has anyone ever refused your offer of help, even though you had the best of intentions? How did you feel? How might they have felt? Why does listening help you to serve more effectively?*

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TALKING THE WALK is a blog series reflecting on episodes of [The All Terrain Podcast](#), written by Matt Little.

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