

Here's something I learned the hard way: if you're taking driving lessons as an adult, it's generally a good idea not to mention it in public. I discussed my driving lessons in a book I wrote last year, for instance, and it's pretty much all that anyone has wanted to talk about ever since. "Can you drive yet?" they'll ask me by way of introduction. "Have you passed your test?"

Every time this has happened, I've had to drop my head, avoid eye contact and apologetically mumble that no, I haven't passed yet, sorry, but I guess I might soon. Because, in truth, I stopped learning. I had a few lessons for the book and then just sort of drifted away. Has it stopped people asking about it? No. No, it hasn't.

But at least now I can shut them up. Because last month, at the grand age of 38, I finally passed my driving test. Two months of learning, six minor faults, one reverse parallel park with the handbrake on and I still managed to pass first time.

Actually, let me walk that back a little. I sort of passed first time. I passed first time *this* time. If we're going to be picky and count every single driving test I've ever taken in my entire life, then I actually passed on my eighth attempt. Because I first took driving lessons as a teenager, and it's fair to say the whole thing went horribly. Back then I took test after test after test; some where I racked up an impossible number of minors, some where I kept indicating the wrong way, one where the examiner had to physically lean over and wrench the steering wheel from my hands to stop me from hitting a parked car. It got so desperate that, at the café where I worked, a middle-aged waitress once gave me a Temazepam to take before my next test to calm me down. I didn't take it, but nevertheless it was a solid sign that things had got undeniably bad.

However, I'm also treating the fact that I have now passed as a solid sign that people are capable of change. Twenty years ago, I cannot remember a time spent behind the wheel – either in lessons or on tests – where I wasn't utterly paralysed with fear. To me, cars were the things I'd spent my entire childhood learning to avoid. They were heavy, speeding, exploding missiles of metal and glass that the Green Cross Code Man made perfectly clear would definitely kill you if they had the chance. I was hit by a car when I was 14, so I knew how much they hurt. What sort of idiot would want to be responsible for controlling one?

My time driving was spent trying myself up in knots, second-guessing everything until I was entirely unmotored. My nights were worse, full of anxiety dreams about speeding through residential areas in a car with no steering or brakes. Teenage me never stood a chance of passing his test. He was far too panic-stricken for that.

Besides, teenage me didn't actually want to drive. He was taking lessons out of misplaced duty, out of a vague sense that this was something he should probably do. He was reluctantly being pushed along by the expectation of others and, God knows, that always ends in disaster.

I didn't even want to drive when I took lessons for my book. I needed a chapter that demonstrated a growing intimacy between me and my brother, so I asked him to teach me how to drive. The lessons were good – and he made for a surprisingly decent instructor – but I packed it in as soon as I'd got enough material for the chapter.

This time, though, I wanted to drive. I had a reason to pass my test – and that reason was my second kid. With one child, you can easily cadge lifts off people. There's plenty of room for you, your partner, a baby seat and the driver. Add a second baby seat into the mix, though, and the backseat becomes an impossible squeeze of held breath and looming deep-vein thrombosis. So I had no choice but to bite the bullet. If we were to get around as a family, it needed to be in a family car.

I've discovered a lot about myself as an adult learner driver, but this feels like the most universal lesson.

If I'm going to do anything in life, it had better be for a very good reason. If I just let myself drift around on

the tepid current of duty, the results will always be disappointing. Give me a purpose, though, and I'll get there in the end. And the purpose doesn't even need to be particularly

My inability to pass a driving test has been a sore subject for me. It's been a highly visible flaw: Stuart Heritage proudly displays his 'P' plate

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Top Gear here I come

At the age of 38, Stuart Heritage has passed his driving test. Is he finally now a grown-up?

Photographs PÅL HANSEN

dramatic. This time it was my low-level desire to take my kids to a Center Parcs. Obviously I reserve the right to post-rationalise a better purpose if I go to Center Parcs and hate it.

Perhaps less universally, I've also come to realise that I might have a tiny problem with authority. On one hand this is a good thing, because teenage me was so absurdly deferent to everyone else that even making eye contact with another person felt like an act of obscene intimacy. Grown-up me has a more defined sense of self. Again, this might be down to having kids. When you're a dad you have to become A Dad, a figure of benevolent authority who knows everything and can do everything and is always there. A Dad needs to have his shit together 24/7, whether he likes it or not.

However, I'm also a self-employed writer. I don't have a boss. Nobody has told me what to do for 15 years. They've made suggestions, but most times I get the final say. For the past decade and a half I've been a tinpot dictator in a one-man nation, ruling over a land of no absolutes or consequences with an iron fist. So my first few driving lessons, where I had to hand over my authority to a stranger whose job was to issue me with strict instructions, were hard. I bristled at the thought of being told what to do.

But then I realised that roads are full of absolutes. They're packed with consequences. Steer the wrong way, look the wrong way, disobey the rules even for a second, and you'll end up in serious trouble. There is always a right answer and a wrong answer, and it's only when



I realised this that I started to improve. It gets harder to learn new things as you grow older, and so I had to very deliberately open myself up enough to absorb new information. Learning how to be vulnerable to new things again was tough, but great. Hopefully I'll never lose that ability again.

Best of all, I think I actually understand why people like driving now. All these years, the appeal of it had completely eluded me. Say I wanted to travel across the country; driving would mean staying on high alert for the whole journey, limiting my concentration to just one thing. I'd much rather take the train, where I can spread out, have a snack, read a book, answer emails. Listen to a podcast, maybe do some work. How was that not always the better option?

But now that I'm an adult with proper adult responsibilities – now that I have to juggle equal parenting with enough work to pay the lion's share of the bills – I find myself regularly overloading. The stress of always having too much to do has sent me slightly haywire over the last couple of years. I'm always finding myself spread too thin; frayed and frantic and treading water as if my life depended on it. But having a weekly driving lesson gave me a whole hour where I had no choice but to limit my concentration to just one thing. I found myself getting excited about it. My driving lessons started to feel like a dip in a clear pool. It felt like a luxury.

Now that I've passed, I can do that whenever I want. I can switch off all the background distractions and focus on one thing and one thing alone. Imagine, not feeling the need to instantly answer an irritating work email because you're busy trying not to die on a multi-lane roundabout. Isn't that the dream?

My inability to pass a driving test has always been a sore subject for me. It's been a highly visible flaw, an exposed nerve. But now I've done it, it feels like I've killed a 20-year-old ghost. It's lifted a weight I didn't know I was carrying. I'll never get to experience all the fun that teenage drivers have. I'll never get to assume that a rusted £300 Micra is a magical key that gets you into anyone's knickers. Instead, I'll be safely and sensibly transporting kids around in the closest thing I can find to a tank. But that's fine. Waiting this long has taught me more about myself than I'll ever know. It won't last but, right now, I feel like I can do anything. If you see me in the street soon, please ask me if I've passed my driving test yet. I'm not scared of the answer any more. ■