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No More Missteps

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Patrick Kuhse in San Diego.
Photo by Robert Benson/Aurora Select

Charting a new life course is possible at any age. Patrick Kuhse is proof.

His high-roller career as a financial adviser imploded when he made a choice that led to years on the lam in Central America and eventual imprisonment. He lost his wealth, his wife and his livelihood, and in his late 40s found himself starting over—as an \$8.75-an-hour ex-con truck driver—with little to guide his future but his Iowa roots and lessons learned.

Now, at 53, he has a reconstituted sense of what really matters, a restored self-image and a freshly crafted vocation as an expert on the perils of abandoning scruples for even a moment. He speaks at almost 100 conferences and institutions a year, including TD Ameritrade, the Association of Personal Financial Advisors and Northeastern University's executive MBA program. His message: Even the smallest ethics breach can bring personal ruin.

With no excuses, Kuhse explains his own downfall. It began when a friend proposed a kickback scheme involving Oklahoma state funds. "I knew it was wrong," Kuhse says, but he told himself the plot wouldn't materialize, so agreeing to participate wouldn't matter. And when it did develop, he told himself his involvement would be temporary and would "look good on the resumé." Once he was enmeshed in the scheme, Kuhse rationalized his involvement with "everyone-else-is-doing-it reasoning."

After the FBI called, he lied to his wife about his innocence and fled with his family to Costa Rica. For more than three years he lived as a fugitive before surrendering to face federal charges including money laundering and conspiracy. He finally served four years in prison.

Kuhse approached prison as a new start. "I feared that if I didn't get clear about why I was there, I'd be back in," he says. "I talked to as many [prisoners] as I could and realized that we were all there because of errors in thinking, often a small thing that might have seemed insignificant that was the first of the downhill slide."

This awareness formed the basis of what he eventually came to label "eight critical thinking errors," including situational ethics and disconnection from people who might challenge your choices.

So the guy who in his 30s had a breathtaking home, two Mercedes and all the accouterments now rents in San Diego, drives a seven-year-old Chevy and regards an afternoon at the beach as the perfect getaway. Since he still owes \$3.2 million of the \$3.89 million restitution ordered by the judge, there's little potential for upgrading. Still, Kuhse thinks he lives a better life now. Moreover, "I'm very careful of who my friends are. I share ideas with them, and I listen to them."

Many in Kuhse's audiences are over 50 who are "already pretty set," though he likes to think his message serves as a reminder that the slope is slippery at any age and the tiniest misstep is risky.

But mostly, Kuhse figures, his older audiences gain solid points to make with grandchildren. "This crop of twentysomethings has huge entitlement issues—not that much different from the way we were," he says. "It's very easy to start that downward slide. We need to chisel and shape their character. Our job now is to pass on what we've learned to the next generation."