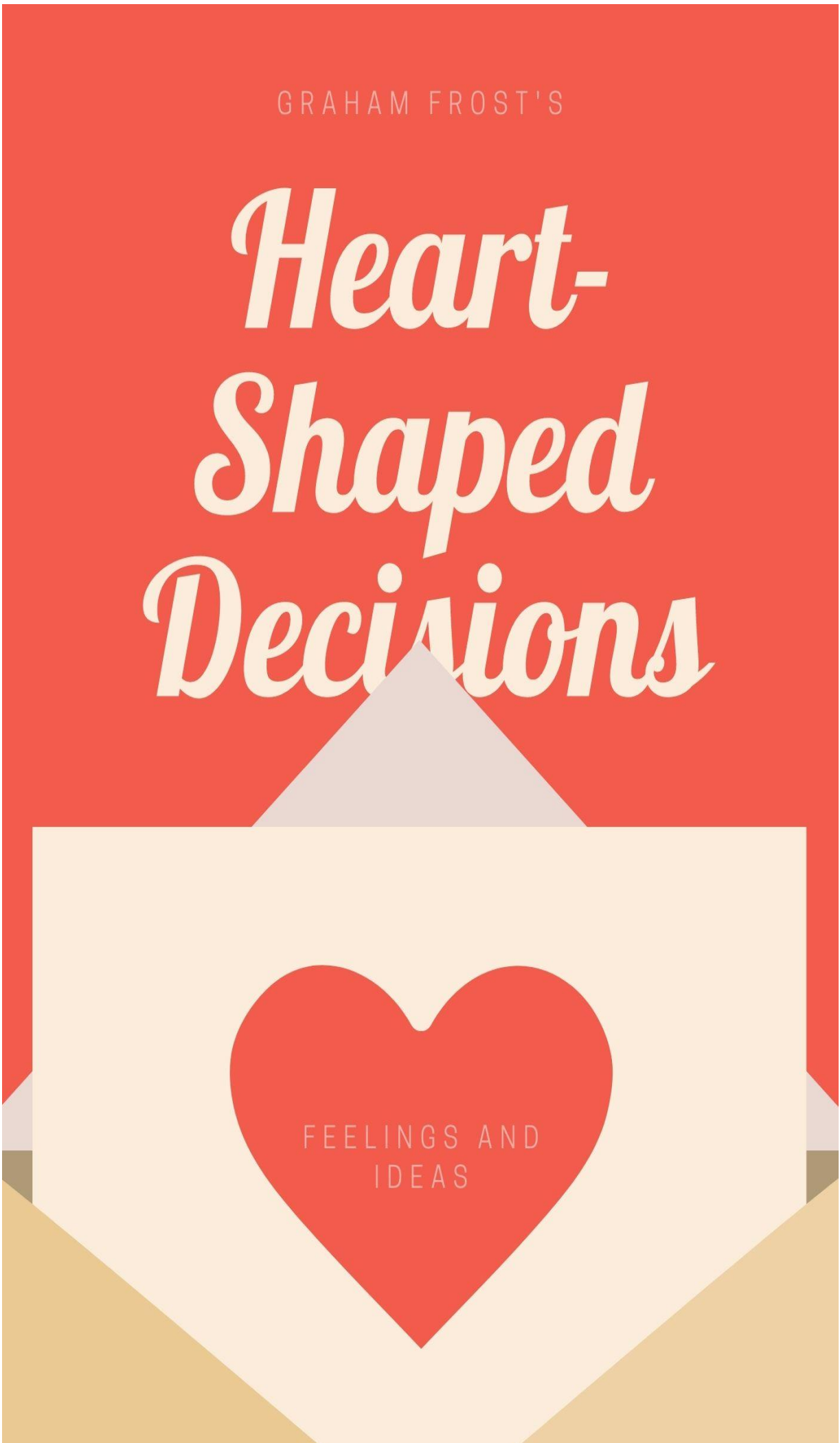


GRAHAM FROST'S

Heart- Shaped Decisions



FEELINGS AND
IDEAS

GRAHAM FROST'S HEART-SHAPED DECISIONS FEELINGS AND IDEAS



This is for Tricia

This e-book is dedicated to the memory of my friend Robert Parker, who passed away from Sarcoma on 29 December 2020, aged 53. Rob knew what a Heart-Shaped Decision was.

INTRODUCTION

Graham Frost is a professional speaker who speaks about his early life in a strict church, how he made the decision over a long period of time to escape from the church aged 17, and how, just a year later, he descended into a life of petty crime.

Graham found himself in custody for a year at the age of 19. With help, he found his way out of the life of crime, and settled into a more 'normal' life of work and pleasure, only to be struck down with testicular cancer when he was 23.

GRAHAM'S STORY

I was 9 years old in 1965. I used to walk to school with a girl called Stephanie. We got on well, and after a week or two, she asked me if I would like to go round to her house for tea one day.

I wanted to, but thought I probably wouldn't be allowed to, because my family was part of a strict church. We weren't supposed to mix with other people any more than we had to.

I told Stephanie I would ask my parents if I could go to her house for tea one day. I knew the answer was probably 'No', but I felt I should ask anyway.

We were sitting at the table having our tea that evening.

'Mum, Dad, Stephanie who I walk to school with has asked me if I can go to her house for tea one day' I said.

My Dad put his solemn look on.

'You know we can't go to other people's houses for tea' he said.

That was the end of that then. There was no point in arguing. The rules were the rules, and could never be broken, or we wouldn't go to heaven.

I felt sad. I had to tell Stephanie the next day that I wasn't allowed to go to her house for tea, and I really wanted to go. I liked her, and I felt she liked me.

Stephanie didn't really speak to me much after that. I think she felt that I thought there was something wrong with her.

I couldn't put into words how I felt, but I knew in my heart that I was unhappy about having my life restricted like this. It was the first step on the journey of making the Heart-Shaped Decision to leave my family eight years later.

There were two more steps when I was 11.

One was when I fell off my bike and broke my wrist when I had been to a shop on a Saturday. Shopping was banned at weekends in our church, so my parents told me that it was judgement on me and gave me no sympathy at all. I laid in bed awake most of the Saturday night, close to tears, and had to go to the early church meeting on Sunday morning at 6 am. Everyone had to be there or the attendance officer would come calling.

I didn't know much about religion or church at 11, despite the fact that I had been to church several times every Sunday and most evenings of the week all my life, but I did wonder where the love was that God was supposed to be.

Perhaps I was so bad that I didn't deserve any.

Another thing that happened the same year as the broken wrist incident was that I went to secondary school. My new school was an almost brand new comprehensive school that I went to because I failed my 11+ examination and didn't go to the grammar school attended by my cousins, who were also in the church.

It felt great to have the freedom to cycle several miles to this new school. I knew virtually no-one there and realised that if I did a few things that I wasn't supposed to do, no-one would be any the wiser.

I made friends with a lad from my form and when he invited me to his house after school one day, I went. He lived a few hundred yards from the school and I remember the excitement I felt going into his house. There was a TV and a record player in the living room, two things that we weren't allowed to have.

His mum was friendly and offered me a drink of orange, which I accepted. Another rule broken. I wasn't supposed to eat or drink with someone who wasn't in our church. I didn't care, this felt good and I wasn't about to stop.

After a few weeks of this friendship, we rode our bikes into town one day and went into Woolworth's. I'm not sure what the plan was, as I'm pretty sure neither of us had any money, but we stole some sweets and stuffed them into our school blazer pockets.

Unfortunately for us, we were spotted by the store detective and marched to the manager's office. The police were called and we were charged with shoplifting. A few weeks later, I had to attend juvenile court, and was put on probation for two years. Just coming up for 12 years old and I was now in possession of a criminal record.

Of course, my new friend's parents blamed me for leading their son astray, so that was the end of that friendship.

But something more important than that happened. My five male cousins, who had been my friends all my life, were told by their mother, my aunt Joyce, not to invite me round any more because I was 'a Bad Influence'.

How would you feel if you were told you were a Bad Influence?

All I wanted was to be like other boys my age, but that wasn't allowed. Apparently, I was 'special', 'chosen'.

The fuss about my shoplifting experience died down. I attended a few appointments with my probation officer, a huge man with a large beard who drove an Aston Martin sports car, and was discharged from my probation sentence.

At this time in my life I felt as if I belonged nowhere. I attended the endless and monotonous church meetings but my heart wasn't there. In fact my heart wasn't anywhere. It was beating in my chest, but just to keep me alive.

The one thing that saved me at this time in my life was reading. I read avidly, even books that were not on the church's approved list. Yes, they even controlled the books we read.

Then my Dad got a job in London. He was a maintenance engineer in a factory owned by a member of our church and had to start work very early in the morning.

After a few months of commuting by train to London every day, he decided that he didn't want to do that anymore, and we moved to the East End of London. My parents, three younger sisters and one younger brother, all off to the big city.

Suddenly I was in a large multicultural school in Clapton, where lots of people were different. It was a fresh start, and it felt interesting. Since then, I have loved fresh starts. If something is a mess today, it doesn't have to be a mess tomorrow.

There were a lot more members of our church in London, and it was much more interesting as we had to travel around London to get to the meetings. Our local church was just a few minutes' walk from our new home, and the people there hadn't known me since I was a baby, so they took me at face value.

It felt different because it was different. I even began to wonder if I could have a future in the church after all. We had to go to a big meeting of all the London churches a few times a week, and I spent my time people-watching, looking at everyone and imagining what it would be like to be them. I didn't have to listen to the nonsense that the important men who spoke were saying, because there was entertainment to be had.

I was spectacularly unsuccessful at school. The only subject I was any good at was English, and I loved writing and reading. I was reprimanded by one teacher for writing an essay that was too long.

'I didn't ask for a novel' she said.

When I wasn't at church or at school I was usually to be found in my room, reading. Thank goodness for those books, because without them I would have had to read the church ministry books. Yes. Every word that the universal leader of our church spoke in public was printed and came out in book form every month. Everyone was supposed to read it. All church families had a library of these books.

Thankfully, there was an excellent library at my school, where I helped out when I had a free period or when there was a PE lesson. I hated physical education with a passion in those days. I read at every opportunity I could get.

I have come to understand myself better in recent years. I am led and guided by my feelings. In these early years of my life, there were precious few good feelings to be had. I felt that everything that might have helped me to feel better was denied to me.

I left school in 1972 with one 'O' level, in English. I had taken seven and failed six. I can't remember my parents ever taking an interest in my education. I was never asked if I had completed my homework. I did my English homework because I was interested in it and passed my English 'O' level with the highest mark of anyone in my school, including sixth formers who were taking it for the second time.

I remember the feeling of achievement this gave me. My English master had written on my final report that he didn't feel that I should stay on and take 'A' level English. There was no chance of that anyway, but to get such a high mark was a result of the hard work I had put in to the one subject at school that I really loved. An early Heart-Shaped Decision!

After I left school, I received a letter from the school inviting me to a prize-giving. I was to be awarded a prize! In fact, the school had created a special prize for me, the 'Library Prize', to thank me for all the time I had spent volunteering in the library.

I showed my parents the letter. They weren't impressed. The only thing they were interested in was whether I was going to turn out to be a good member of the church or not.

'Well, you won't be able to go to the prizegiving', said my Dad.

'Why?' I asked,

'Because it's in the Salvation Army hall' he replied. 'We can't go to other churches, so you will have to tell them you can't go'.

I remembered the incident with Stephanie seven years ago. The time I had fallen off my bike. The shoplifting incident.

My heart told me to go to the prize-giving and face the consequences. I went.

It turned out the reason the prize-giving was in the Salvation Army hall was because the school hall wasn't large enough for the boys and all the parents who wanted to attend.

I marched up to the stage when my name was called out and was presented with the complete works of Charles Dickens. There was some applause, the first I had ever received, and I realised that I was probably the only boy there receiving a prize whose parents were not there to share the moment with him.

No matter. I had received my first ever recognition, and it felt great. I went home with my new books. For the next few months, I read Dickens avidly and his books remain some of my favourites to this day.

I started work two weeks after leaving school in 1972. I caught the bus from near our home in Clapton to my new office in Shoreditch.

Get me. I had arrived. I wore a suit and tie to work and carried my sandwiches in a briefcase. I was 16 and out in the big wide world.

After a few weeks, I stopped eating my lunch separately from everyone else in the office. I had told them that my church wouldn't let me eat with other people. I got a few quizzical looks, but no one said anything. Perhaps they did behind my back!

Eventually, one day I just sat and ate my sandwiches at my desk like anyone else. It felt good. I realised that I was like anyone else, really, and that to believe that I was different was ridiculous. Thank goodness for Ernie and Alec, the two older men in the office, who both smoked pipes, and Tony and Mike, two younger men who were very friendly towards me, even if they thought I was still a bit wet behind the ears. I was!

They all smoked, and so did almost everyone who worked in the building, so I started buying a pack of cigarettes most days and smoking on the bus to and from work, with Linda from Accounts, who lived near me. Needless to say, smoking was also banned in our church, so I had regular questions from my Dad about why I always smelled of smoke.

'Well, everyone at work smokes and I go to work on the bus, and everyone smokes upstairs, so that's where it's coming from'.

Nearly everyone in the big wide world I was being drawn towards did smoke in 1972. I was just being like the people that I increasingly realised were good people, and quite the reverse of what I had been brought up to believe.

One Friday lunchtime my new colleagues asked me if I would like to come to the pub with them. You may have guessed already that I accepted the invitation. In my church, drinking alcohol was accepted, even encouraged, but going to the pub was strictly forbidden.

I really expected something bad to happen to me after I had gone to the pub and had a couple of beers with my workmates, but nothing happened. I enjoyed the feeling of camaraderie with my work colleagues, and that day was an important one, because I really did begin to feel that this new, real world that I was dipping my toes into was something I wanted a lot more of.

Gradually I started rebelling against the church rules more and more. I began to grow my hair longer (yes, I had hair in those days!) and allowed a faint moustache to sprout. Against the church rules. With my new financial independence, I was able to buy clothes, and pushed the limits of what was permitted in that area too. A light purple shirt and floral bow tie became my apparel of choice for the five church meetings we were required to attend on Sundays. The more conservative church members looked askance at me, my parents didn't know what to say so said nothing, probably in the vain hope that I was just going through a phase.

I told my parents endless lies about where I was going when I left the house. The truth was that I was going to the local pub to spend time with some old school mates that I had met. I was feeling a sense of belonging in the local pub that I no longer felt in the church. In fact I hadn't belonged there since I was 11, and was referred to as a Bad Influence. I had tried, but it was no longer for me.

The crunch came when I had been out at a house party after the pub one Saturday night, and arrived home drunk at 4 am. My Dad was waiting up for me, with his sad eyes. I went up the stairs to bed, without a word.

An hour later, my Dad was doing the rounds, waking us all up for the first church meeting of the day. We had to be there by 6 am. Of course, I was still drunk, so I just told him I wasn't coming.

'What do you mean, you're not coming?'

'I'm not coming. I've only been asleep for an hour'

My Dad shook his head and walked out of the room. I was still in bed when my parents and five siblings returned from the first church meeting of the day to have breakfast and then set off for the next meeting at 10, on the other side of London. Thankfully, I was left alone.

By the time they arrived home for lunch, I was out.

I never attended another church meeting after that day.

My life became a game of cat and mouse. I would only be in the house during the day if everyone else was out. I waited until the family had gone out to church every evening before coming home from work. My dear mother would always leave my dinner in the oven for me. I would eat it and go either to my room to read, or out to the pub.

Eventually things shifted.

My Dad announced that we were moving to south London. The church was closing in Clapton due to lack of numbers, and everyone had to move south of the Thames.

I felt angry. No-one had consulted me. I felt at home in Clapton and was building a friendship group there. The day of the move, I said to my Dad:

'You never asked me if I wanted to move, so I'm going to work. Tell me where the new house is, and I'll find it after work'.

Sure enough, I turned up at the house at 6 pm that evening after work, to find everyone unpacking. I'd been given a room at the back of the house on the ground floor, so 'I wouldn't disturb everyone with my comings and goings' as my mother said.

Living in the new house in South London really was the beginning of the end of my living with my family. I found a pub nearby and spent far too much time in there, drinking alone.

One night my family came home from their church meeting and found me asleep on the stairs.

At weekends I would get the train over the river to Clapton and spend time with my friends over there, mostly in the pub.

Eventually some people I knew who ran a pub in Clapton were moving to another pub in West London. Some of us went over to Acton for their opening night.

I saw an opportunity.

'I don't suppose you have any jobs going?' I asked Ivy, the landlady.

'Yeah, we're looking for some staff, love' she replied. 'You want to come and work for us?'

That was how the first massive Heart-Shaped Decision in my life was made. I decided to go and live and work in a pub at the age of 17 years and a few months.

Arriving home from work one Monday evening, I asked my mother if I could borrow a suitcase.

'What do you want a suitcase for?' she asked.

'I'm leaving home' I replied.

My Mum was speechless. She went to the phone to ring my Dad at work.

I stood in the hallway waiting impatiently. I had a shift behind the bar to do that evening. My new life was about to start. My decision was made.

Eventually my mother came off the phone.

'Your father says we are not lending you a suitcase because we don't want to encourage you to leave'.

What to do? We had a shop on the corner of our road. I ran down there and it was still open.

'Can I borrow half a dozen of your carrier bags?' I asked the shopkeeper.

Miraculously, he grabbed six large carrier bags and handed them to me.

'There you are young man' he said.

I took them, mumbled my thanks, and ran back up to our family home.

By the time my father arrived home from work, I had packed what belongings I could into these six carrier bags, and was ready to make my escape.

I walked out of the door, turned left and set off down the road to the railway station, where I would catch a train into London town.

I looked behind me, and both my parents were following me. They were both in tears. I had never seen my Dad cry before.

After that day, I didn't see my mother again for 27 years.

Heart-Shaped Decisions can be painful.

I really had no idea of what this new life had in store for me. My escape was based on feelings only, which is really what I mean by Heart-Shaped Decisions. If I had taken the time to think through what I was doing, I might not have taken the action that I needed to take, at that time in my life, to separate myself from something that was not conducive to the life that I wanted for myself.

I have described it thus: 'I knew what I didn't want when I was 17. At that point I still didn't know what I did want'.

My new life working in the pub was so totally different to what I had been used to previously that I might as well have been living on another planet.

The people I was working for and living with had come from the East End of London to the West of London, to run a pub on a rough council estate where many of the people were in irregular employment and some of them thought they were gangsters. Perhaps some of them were. It was not uncommon to see weapons in the pub, and there were bloodstains on the wooden floor where people had serious fights when too much drink had been taken at weekends.

The landlady's son was a massive man and would often have to wade out into the melee around the bar on a Friday or Saturday evening and people would literally bounce off him. It was enthralling and frightening at the same time.

Here was this naïve 17 year old lad, learning how to work behind the bar (the landlord called me Speedy, because I was so slow at serving to begin with), and learning how to live in the real world, or at least, this particular corner of West London's version of the real world.

Into this mix came a tall, skinny lad, a few years older and much more worldly-wise than myself, who was taken on as a live-in barman a few months after me.

Chris and I got on well. I looked up to him, in more ways than one, and we shared a twin bedroom in the accommodation above the pub. The landlord and landlady were regularly taking themselves off to their caravan on the coast during the week, and the landlady's son took the opportunity to go out gallivanting in their absence, so Chris and I were often left to our own devices during the weekday evenings when the pub tended to be quieter.

My 18th birthday took place around this time. It was a midweek evening and Chris and I came up with the idea of having a party after hours. Fortunately, all the adults were out that evening, and I played DJ while a few friends that I had made went behind the bar and helped themselves to drinks. Eventually at around 2 am we saw a car pull into the car park.

Landlord's son was back, and we had to get rid of everyone very quickly and scarper upstairs to our room.

A few weeks later, we had again been left home alone to look after the pub on a Tuesday evening. By about 9 pm we didn't have a single customer.

Chris looked at me.

'I think we should leave here while we have the chance. We're just being exploited. I think we should pack our stuff, take the money out of the till, and leave'.

'Where will we go?' I asked.

'Leave that to me' said Chris. 'Let's just do it'.

This didn't feel right at all, but it was exciting, and I let the stupid gland that lives in my head take over.

Less than half an hour later we were scuttling off down the road to the tube station.

'Where are we going?' I asked Chris, like a child. He was only about four years older than me, but it was very much a parent/child relationship, with me firmly in the place of the child.

We took the Piccadilly line from Acton Town to South Kensington and walked up a street that was lined with large older houses that had all been turned into hotels.

Chris had the air of someone who knew what he was doing. I was now completely in his hands. I found myself back in 'doing what I was told' mode, something I thought I had escaped from the previous year. The irony of the situation was completely lost on 18 year old me.

We walked up the steps into one of the hotels. I had no idea what was going on, as I had never previously been in a hotel, never mind stayed in one.

Chris walked up to the counter and asked for a twin room. We were shown to a room, and closed the door.

'How did you manage that?' I asked.

'Just leave everything to me' came the reply. 'I have done this before. We're not going to pay. We are going to stay here for a few days, order our food on room service and then when no-one's looking we will just walk out'.

The T-bone steak and chips I ate an hour later was marvellous, quite possibly the best meal I had ever eaten, but I felt most uncomfortable. Once again I felt myself being dragged down a road that was not the one I wanted to be on, but there was a certain excitement and I really didn't want to be out on the streets on my own, or return home to my family, so I went along on the ride.

A couple of weeks later, the £300 we had taken from the pub was running out. We were staying in another hotel, this time in Bayswater Road.

Chris had invented the perfect crime.

I would climb out of the fourth-floor window of the room we were staying in and along the foot wide window ledge to the room two doors down from ours. I would open the window from the outside and climb in through the window.

This all took place during the late morning when people were generally not in their rooms.

I followed my instructions, trying to ignore the vertigo that gripped my insides as I crept along the narrow window ledge.

Fortunately, the old-fashioned sash window opened easily from the outside. Even more fortunately, I realised within a second that there was no-one in the room, but there was clearly someone staying there, as there was a suitcase on the floor and the bed had obviously been used.

Something made me open the suitcase and have a quick rifle through the contents.

Hidden between two shirts, was a paper wallet containing traveller's cheques. I grabbed it and ensured that the suitcase looked as it had when I entered the room. I checked that I had closed the window and gingerly opened the door into the corridor.

There stood Chris, who had been keeping watch.

By that evening, we were in another hotel. I spent most of the evening and a fair part of the night practising the signature on the traveller's cheques, so I could go into a bank the next day and cash them. There was over £300 worth, enough to keep us going for several weeks in 1974.

This crazy existence went on for several months. Eventually we were arrested, and I spent two weeks in a remand centre, as I was of no fixed address. I still hadn't made the decision to escape from Chris, and the police hadn't yet made the connection between us and the money we had stolen from the pub.

I was on a merry-go-round, and it was spinning too fast to get off.

Eventually I found myself on probation again. Chris and I had rented a flat in Battersea, well before that area became gentrified, and I remember my probation officer inviting me to his house for dinner with him and his partner, something that I am sure would not happen today.

We had spent most of our ill-gotten gains equipping our flat with hi-fi equipment and records. The biters were bitten when the flat was burgled and everything was taken, then we were evicted when it was discovered that we had lived there for several months without paying any rent.

The stupid gland in my head was beginning to run out of steam.

I was reduced to eating pie and mash for my main meal every day because it was cheap. I was unable to cook for myself. (I actually love proper London pie and mash, but eating it every day was stretching it a bit!)

One day Chris and I broke into the local Tesco to steal food.

Eventually we were up in court again for various offences, including the theft from the pub. We were given a deferred sentence, which meant we had to return to court in six months. If we could prove that we had been 'of good character' for those six months, we would be given a non-custodial sentence.

I remember walking out of court with a spring in my step. I felt good, I was free, and I had been given another chance.

I was still stuck to Chris though. I couldn't extricate myself. We found ourselves a crummy bedsit where we could live while we decided what to do. I wanted to get a job, but he thought returning to crime was a better short term solution. I was so naïve in those days, I didn't know that I could have signed on the dole, as it was called then.

One day Chris had gone to see his girlfriend for the day. I sat in our crummy little bedsit feeling very alone and sorry for myself.

I felt that I couldn't go on like this. I needed to make another fresh start.

I packed my belongings into a holdall bag and walked out into the street.

I walked for miles around London, not knowing where to go or what to do.

I was no more than a few miles from my parents' home, but I couldn't go back there. I had never felt so alone.

Eventually, after many hours of walking, and stopping to buy food and drink a couple of times, I found myself at Victoria station. I put my holdall bag into a left luggage locker, and decided to sit on the station for a while.

Eventually I slept there for the night. They didn't move homeless people on in those days.

When I say slept, I mean cat-napped for a few minutes here and there. It's a horrible feeling, sleeping rough. You don't feel safe at all.

I was up early. Getting up just involved sitting up on the bench I had been napping on.

I had 5p in my pocket and went and bought a newspaper with it. I had no more money, no home, and no job.

I sat and looked around the station. People were on their way to work in offices nearby, with their suits and briefcases. I had been one of them a year ago. Now I had nothing.

After a while I had a plan. I would walk down Victoria Street and go in every pub, looking for a job and a place to live, until someone took me on.

The first pub I went into, the people behind the bar looked at me as if I was something they had found on the bottom of my shoe and told me they didn't need anyone. At the next pub I got lucky. The landlord was a friendly Irishman.

'I don't have any jobs, mate, but if you go down that street over there, there's a little pub at the end, the landlord's name is John, he's a friend of mine. I think he might be looking for someone.'

My heart leapt. I walked around the corner into Strutton Ground. There was a street market there, and at the other end, I saw 'Grafton's' pub. I walked in and asked the stout man who looked a bit like a bank manager behind the bar if I could speak to John.

'I'm John' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

I was just talking to your friend at the pub round the corner, and he said you might be looking for some staff' I said.

John looked me up and down. I must have looked a right state. I had long hair in those days, and I hadn't shaved. I had slept rough and hadn't even looked in a mirror that morning.

'I'll give you a job' he said. 'What's your name?'

I told him.

'Are you looking for somewhere to live as well, Graham?'

'Yes please'

'OK, we can arrange that' he said with a smile.

'I just need to go and get my stuff' I said. 'Is it OK if I come back in half an hour? I can start work straight away if you need me to'.

'Yes, that's fine.'

And so I got lucky. John made the Heart-Shaped Decision to give me a job, and by lunchtime that day I was working behind the bar in Grafton's with two young Irish barmaids and an older Irishman, Joe.

I settled into the little family at Grafton's very quickly. John and his wife Pauline had two young children, and all the staff lived in, including a cook and an old man who helped with the cellar and various other odd jobs.

The atmosphere was much better than the pub I had worked in before. Everyone was friendly and welcoming, including the regular customers, and I soon felt at home. I felt that I had landed on my feet and was determined to make a go of this and put the past few months behind me.

The day I was supposed to attend court for the result of my deferred sentence came and went. The stupid gland took over again. I couldn't bring myself to tell John and Pauline that I had been in trouble with the police. I stupidly didn't turn up at court, thinking that as long as I kept out of trouble, no-one would be any the wiser. I also had a girlfriend and didn't want to tell her about my shady past.

Life went on for a few weeks and then the inevitable happened.

I had been out drinking one Sunday with a new barman who had come to work at Grafton's. He was a loud Scouser called Tommy. We both got Saturday night and all day Sunday off, as our pub was in an area that was quiet at weekends.

Something felt wrong as we left a pub in Fulham where we had been drinking on the Sunday evening. I felt terrible on the Underground back to St James's Park, and got off the train at Victoria as I was feeling very strange and didn't want to be ill on the train.

I don't remember much after that.

I was picked up on Victoria station by the police and woke up in a cell.

The next morning, I was up in front of the judge at Guildhall Crown Court.

Incredibly, I saw my employer, John, sitting in the courtroom. I couldn't bring myself to establish eye contact with him.

Fortunately, John knew what a Heart-Shaped Decision was.

He stood up in court, and stood up for me.

'Graham Frost has worked for me for a few months now. He is reliable and has never stolen a penny from me. I am happy to continue to employ him'.

Sadly, the judge was not in a mood to listen. I was sentenced to Borstal training for six months to two years. I would lose my liberty again for at least the next six months.

John came to see me in the cell I was taken to after being sentenced.

'Now, Graham, I want you to know that there will be a job for you with us when you come out of prison. We will be in touch with you'.

Sometimes you need things to fall in your favour, and that day, despite nearly everything going against me, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. I made the Heart-Shaped Decision to focus on that.

I spent the first two weeks of my sentence in Wormwood Scrubs prison. To be quite honest, they could have sent me home straight from there, and I would never have offended again. I felt less than human in that place. Animals are treated better.

After two weeks of assessment, I was transported in a prison van off to H M Borstal, Gaynes Hall, in the Cambridgeshire countryside near Huntingdon.

I was to spend at least six months living and sleeping in a dormitory with 19 other lads.

After Wormwood Scrubs it was like paradise. We had a military-style kit inspection once a week, but the rest of the time, the regime was quite relaxed, and we had a routine.

I was given a job in the kitchen, looking after the dining hall, where the 180 or so lads from all the dorms ate all their meals. I was woken at 5.30 am, and breakfast was served at 7.30. I had a break at 10 am, when I would go back to a deserted dorm and have a shower, then it was back to work to prepare and serve lunch. I was kept busy all day, and on Saturdays I volunteered to clean the kitchen thoroughly for the whole morning.

Mr Breakwell, the officer in charge of the kitchen, used to leave his radio in the kitchen over the weekend. One Saturday I was trying to find something to listen to while I worked, and came across the Robbie Vincent show on BBC Radio London. I listened to that show every Saturday morning throughout the time I was in Borstal, and it shaped my taste in music.

Would I have found soul, jazz and funk music somewhere else? Who know, but I found it in Borstal, and it has provided me with much pleasure since.

I still had lessons to learn.

When I had been in Borstal for a few weeks, a new lad came into our dorm, John. He was bigger than me, and started talking to me a lot. Soon I was knocking around with him, because he made me feel safe. I was starting to fall under the influence of someone who was not good for me again, and I was completely unaware of it.

Eventually he had a violent argument with a lad from another dorm and was 'shipped out', as they used to say. He was moved to another prison and I never saw or heard from him again.

There was an unpleasant outcome for me, too. I was taken to the punishment block and detained there overnight, as because I had been seen as John's 'sidekick', the officers thought I had been involved in the fight in some way. In fact, I had no idea that this had happened and was very shocked to find myself locked up in solitary confinement overnight.

A few days after this event I was called in by Mr Taylor, my personal officer. What he said to me that day has stayed with me.

'Frosty, why do you think you're still here? You're not a criminal. We know. We see lads come in here and we know there's not much we can do for them. They're already on that path. But you're different. You can do something with your life. What do you think you need to do?'

'Stop knocking around with bad people, sir' I replied.

'Right, go back to the dorm, sit on your bed, and think about what you're going to do with the rest of your life, because I don't want to see you back in here'.

A few weeks later I was given my release date. Since my conversation with 'Tinker' Taylor, as we used to call him, I had kept myself to myself, got my work done, and focused on keeping out of trouble.

I was released during the long hot summer of 1976. I went back to work at Grafton's and went for walks in the nearby St James's Park. My colleagues were pleased to see me back, and I was soon back in the swing of things.

What would have become of me if it had not been for the support of John and Pauline. I have no idea, but a lesson I learn when looking back on that episode in my life is that sometimes you need someone else to make a Heart -Shaped Decision for you.

Life went on. John and Pauline asked me to go with them when they moved to a different pub a year or so after I was released from Borstal. If I had a plan, it was probably to stay in the pub business, perhaps become a landlord myself one day.

Eventually I did leave them, only to end up working in the next pub along the road, where I met the first great love of my life.

She was 8 years older than me, had children already and was still married to someone else.

We made the Heart-Shaped Decision to be together, and we were. I learned how to love and be loved in the time I was with my first real girlfriend. I felt that it was forever, but nature had other ideas.

One of the things that Pat did was tell me that I needed to get a 'proper job'. I took her advice, and applied for a job on the railway, which I started in January 1979, working on the restaurant cars between London, Yorkshire and Scotland.

A few months in to this new job, I started feeling tired all the time, lacked energy, and was losing weight. Being a man, of course, I didn't want to go to the doctor's, until my girlfriend insisted. After a second visit to the doctor, nothing was improving, so Pat accompanied me to the hospital one Saturday morning.

I went in to the consulting room and told the doctor about my symptoms. A swollen testicle, tiredness, weight loss and lack of energy.

Two or three doctors came and looked at me, each looking more serious than the one before. I wondered what was going on. Eventually I found out.

'Mr Frost, do you have anyone with you?'

'Yes, my girlfriend's in the waiting room. She has bubbly blonde hair..'

Someone went to find Pat.

'Mr Frost, I'm sorry to say that you have a tumour. We need you to come back to the hospital tomorrow afternoon so we can prepare you for an operation on Monday morning. It's really important that you come back. This is serious, and unless we operate immediately it could threaten your life'.

I don't remember feeling scared at that point, just determined. Absolutely convinced that I was going to get better and go back to the life that Pat and I were making for ourselves.

Then followed the most difficult twelve months that I have ever experienced in my life. After the operation to remove a testicle, I had six courses of debilitating chemotherapy at The Royal Marsden Hospital. By the end of 1979, I weighed 7 stone and had over twenty mouth ulcers. I was as run down as it is possible to be while still being alive, and worse was to come. Just before Christmas I was taken back into hospital with pleurisy and put into a side room on my own.

Pat came to see me, all connected-up to drips and looking, I am sure, at death's door. Seven stone, no hair, I must have looked dreadful. Thankfully, there were no mirrors.

'I'm going to get in touch with your parents' she said. 'They would want to be here'.

'No, please' I croaked weakly. Please don't . They will come and take over, and I'll have to escape all over again. Please, I'll be OK.'

Fortunately, she listened to me. I was OK, because all this happened over forty years ago and I am still here to tell the tale.

I was OK because I made the Heart-Shaped Decision to fight for my life.

I was OK because many doctors and nurses make the Heart-Shaped Decision every year to go into the British National Health Service.

I was OK because people make the Heart-Shaped Decision to work on drugs and other therapies that save people's lives.

Before I was 25 years of age, I had made three Heart-Shaped Decisions that would shape my life. I have made many more since.

Leaving my entire family at the age of 17 was a Heart-Shaped Decision, born of an overwhelming feeling that I needed to have a different life to the one that was being planned for me.

Deciding to walk away from a criminal lifestyle even though I had nowhere to go, purely because it felt like the right thing to do.

Finding the determination and resilience to fight cancer, because I felt that there was still so much living to do.

So, maybe you are wondering 'How do I make a Heart-Shaped Decision?'

Well, it is all based on feelings. I was trying to explain this a year or so ago to my friend Rob Parker, who has since sadly passed away from sarcoma, a rare and aggressive form of cancer. He thought he didn't get the idea of Heart-Shaped Decisions as he was a very logical and analytical person. I was interviewing him for my podcast, when he suddenly realised that his decision to give up a good job and go travelling for eighteen months in his mid-20s had been a Heart-Shaped Decision.

My decision to leave my family and go off into the world in search of a better life for myself was a Heart-Shaped Decision that was years in the making. It took me from the age of 9, when I wasn't allowed to go to Stephanie's house for tea, through the episode where my cousins were told I was a bad influence, until I found a way out when I was 17.

A Heart-Shaped Decision is really about a heart looking to give and receive love. I felt unloved in my family setting because it was all about sticking to the rules, and then when you did, there was still no love or approval coming, because you had to wait until you got to heaven for that. I never ever felt good enough.

So, how do you FEEL about a situation you are in?

It could be a relationship, a friendship, a job, a group of friends, a pastime, any activity you do in your life.

What are your real feelings about the person or people you are involved with? (For me it's almost always a people thing)

In my late 30s, I found myself in a bad marriage. Marrying my wife had not been a Heart - Shaped Decision. I had floundered into it. Three years in there was no happiness. No joy. No love. While there was a chink of light in the marriage, I was prepared to work at it, but I felt there was nothing there anymore. The dials were at zero. So, I made the Heart-Shaped Decision to leave. The feeling of relief was amazing, and I went on to have some of the best times of my life in the years that followed.

How does a particular situation in your life make you feel?

Let's stop and do an exercise.

It could be a relationship, a job, a friendship, where you live, any situation you find yourself in...

There is a positive column and a negative column in the table below, and I have filled in some words that you could use in your table on the next page. You will note that they are 'feeling words', because Heart-Shaped Decisions are based on feelings, rather than thoughts.

Negative Feeling Words	Positive Feeling Words
Alone, angry, anxious, ashamed, attacked, belittled, betrayed, bitter, cheated, claustrophobic, confused, controlled, criticised, deceived, degraded, demeaned, depressed, dominated, don't fit, embarrassed, empty, failure, fearful, foolish, forgotten, frightened, frustrated, guilty, helpless, hopeless, humiliated, hurt, inadequate, insecure, insignificant, insulted,	Adored, alive, amazing, appreciated, awesome, blissful, brilliant, calm, cheerful, cherished, clear, comfortable, confident, content, courageous, creative, decisive, delightful, dynamic, eager, easy, empowered, energised, enthusiastic, excited, exhilarated, extraordinary, exuberant, fabulous, flowing, focused, free, glorious, glowing, graceful, gracious,

invisible, left out, lost, manipulated, misunderstood, neglected, neglected, not cared for, numb, offended, outcast, overwhelmed, panicked, powerless, pressured, put down, rejected, ridiculed, scorned, shattered, small, stupid, unaccepted, unloved, unsafe, unwanted, violated, vulnerable, withdrawn	grateful, happy, harmonious, hopeful, inspired, invigorated, irresistible, joyful, jubilant, kind, light, lovable, loved, magical, magnificent, marvellous, optimistic, passionate, peaceful, proud, precious, quiet, radiant, receptive, refreshed, relaxed, relieved, renewed, resilient, satisfied, serene, terrific, thrilled, tranquil, trusting, trusted, uplifted, valued, vibrant, vivacious, warm, welcomed, whole, wise, wonderful, worthy.
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You can use your own words if you like, it's up to you. What I would like you to do is take your situation or relationship and write down as many words as you can that describe your feelings about the situation or relationship in each column. You will find a blank table on the next page to do this.

I have put the negative feelings in the left hand column because I prefer to deal with them first. That means you can finish on a positive, which is a Heart-Shaped Decision, in my opinion. What do you think?

Negative Feelings	Positive Feelings

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Remember, you can use your own words if you prefer.
Now, when you have completed the exercise, ask yourself this question.

Do the negatives outweigh the positives, or are there more positives than negatives?

If there are more words in the negative column than there are in the positive side, how is that making you feel?

Can you find a way of changing the negatives into positives? If not, you have a big question to ask yourself. Are you content to live a life, or an area of your life, that involves more negative feelings than positive ones? How does that impact on how you feel about the rest of your life?

I have done this exercise several times in my life.

When I left my family, I did it without realising what I was doing, over a long period of time, and the same when I decided to give up my life of petty crime, although that was a more conscious and quick decision. My decision to fight cancer was instant, but purely based on feelings, although of course feelings do not cure cancer. I'm immensely grateful to all the people who made the Heart-Shaped Decision to go into medicine for my complete recovery from cancer.

When I left my wife in 1995, I felt there was far more in the negative column than there was in the positive side. I could just about live with 90% negative and 10% positive, as I felt I had to respect my wedding vows, but when the positive column had almost reached zero, I knew it was time to bail out and have a fresh start. There is nothing wrong with a fresh start, in fact I believe that we should have more of them.

Another example involves a job I was in from 2006 until 2010. The culture of the company didn't really suit me from the start, but I was doing work that I enjoyed and found fulfilling and the people I was training made me feel valued, so it didn't matter so much that my manager didn't really understand or appreciate me, because I was getting the positive feelings from elsewhere.

All that changed when I got a new boss after about three years in the role. Gradually she

undermined me, and it got to the point where I would avoid her phone calls as I had to get into the right state of mind to speak to her. Eventually I felt that I couldn't change the situation, I evaluated all my options and realised that another fresh start was needed.

My final story is a positive one, because I do so enjoy finishing on a positive, and I really recommend it to you, too.

In 1996, I was approached by the CEO of the railway company I was working for and asked if I would be interested in a job in training and development. My initial feeling was a positive one, but then the negative feelings crowded in – you know the voice in your head that tells you that you can't do things? My CEO used some positive words about me, and the result of that conversation was that I applied for a position, and I have now worked, one way and another, in learning and development for 25 years, with far more in the positive column than in the negative.

Christopher, my CEO at the time, understood Heart-Shaped Decisions. He was a heart-shaped leader, always looking for ways of making his people feel positive, and working for him, there was always more in the positive column.

Of course, if there is more in the negative column, and you don't feel able to change that, then the Heart-Shaped Decision might need to be a fresh start.

I am now a professional speaker, telling my story mainly to young people, and helping them to make their own Heart-Shaped Decisions early in life, because as I have realised, the decisions you make early on really shape your life. Please contact me using the details below if you would like me to work with a group of young people, or work individually with a young person to help them with their decisions. I work in schools, colleges, universities, prisons and children's homes, and have an Enhanced DBS certificate.

I also coach and mentor individuals and small groups on making their own Heart-Shaped Decisions. If you would like to explore the idea of some coaching, or to join one of my Support and Accountability Groups, please give me a call on 07766 916317 (+44 7766 916317 outside the UK) or email graham@grahamfrost.com

You can find my Heart-Shaped Decisions podcast here <https://anchor.fm/graham-frost>
Many interviews with inspiring people who have made life-changing Heart-Shaped Decisions.

My YouTube channel is at <https://tinyurl.com/x6vety75>
There you can sign up for a daily motivational video about Heart-Shaped Decisions, and see some of my longer talks and videos.

I also have a website at www.grahamfrost.com

Finally, I would like to thank a few people for supporting me with the idea of Heart-Shaped Decisions. They are: Pam Burrows, David Hyner, Julie Creffield, Mark Wingfield and Darren Harris.

