

**“Retire to What, Exactly?” - Removing the Fear of
Testing Different Career Models - Dr. Zahid
Ahmed: Ep #416**



Full Episode Transcript

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Dr. David Phelps

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Welcome to the Dentist Freedom Blueprint, a podcast about freedom—freedom from expectations of society and the traditional path to success that has been ingrained in us from our early years, I'm joined by mavericks, renegades, and non-conformers to discuss an anti-traditional path to financial freedom, freedom of time, relationships, health, and ultimately freedom of purpose. My name is Dr. David Phelps. Let's get started.

David Phelps: Good day, everyone. This is Dr. David Phelps of the Freedom Founders Mastermind community, and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint Podcast. Back today with a conversation that I have actually been looking forward to for some time.

A person who has become a friend of mine, definitely a mentor in many respects, and actually, is somebody I wish I would've had him to talk to when I was in my younger years. I've learned a lot over my many years of experience.

But I've found this gentleman, this colleague in our dental industry, to be somebody who is very introspective and has thought a lot about his life, his practice, his profession, his family, and really, the ability and desire, and willingness to explore different iterations of really who he is.

And so, without further ado, I'm going to bring in now my good friend, Dr. Zahid Ahmed. Zahid, great to have you today.

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Zahid Ahmed: Thank you, Dr. Phelps. I appreciate it. Very generous introduction, but happy to be here, and happy to have a conversation.

David Phelps: We're going to get to some of your background in a moment, but I just wanted to kind of seed what we're going to talk about today. You are very young, 38-years-old. You have a young family with children that are not even teenagers yet.

And yet, you sold your practice, your flagship practice some six months ago. So, I guess we can tell the audience at age 38, you're retired, you're done. But actually, that's not really the case. You're not done.

And what I want to do is delve into today with how you look at your life and some of the decisions, the options that you have purposely, intentionally, created to live the life you want to live.

But let's go back in time. I'm curious, Zahid, because I've never had a chance to ask you this. When did you become interested in dentistry per se? When it was like, “Okay, I'm going to go to dental school.”

Because I imagine you've had over your years of growing up and going to school and going to college; when does dentistry actually enter the list of that's what I want to be?

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, that's an easy answer, and I'll keep the long story short. When I was a sophomore in high school, I wanted to be a pediatrician. And I was actually over at a neighbor's house, we grew up together, a bunch of boys. They had three boys. It was me and my older brother. So, just neighborhood families growing up together.

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Their father was a pediatrician, and it was the summertime. We were swimming in their pool and he said, “Do you really want to become a pediatrician?”

And me, brainwashed son of immigrants, was like, “Yeah, absolutely. It's a doctor. It's a good profession.” And him being a pediatrician challenged me, he said, “Are you sure you want to be a pediatrician?” He's like, “You're just going to be an employee for a big hospital when you get older, and it's not a great lifestyle, you're on call.”

And then he said, “You should become a dentist.” And I thought, that's disgusting. He wants me staring teeth for the rest of my life.” Anyway, he pushed me, he said, “No, go shadow in a dental office, and you'll see it's a different world.”

And that led down a long journey. I spent a summer shadowing an oral surgeon, actually. And then I shadowed in an orthodontist office. I didn't know anything about dentistry.

But when I saw an orthodontist sitting very comfortably in their office drinking coffee, a bunch of patients in the chair, the staff doing all the work, I said, “Wow, I could do this.”

And that rolled into a number of things. But I decided very early on, sophomore, junior year of high school that I wanted to become a dentist. And I love being a dentist. I love the craft of dentistry. So, it was a good fit. But things have evolved differently.

David Phelps: Yeah. We'll move into that. That's interesting that a pediatrician had enough of those insights to understand the world of dentistry.

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I guess, he must have had a dentist that he and his family went to. Maybe he had a friend or colleagues that were a dentists, and he had a little bit more of insight in that lifestyle, and gave you his very authentic advice at that point in time: “Hey, do you really want to be a pediatrician?”

Zahid Ahmed: He was very much a mentor to us. I mean, he was like a member of the family. We still keep in contact with him today, even though we've moved away. I mean, essentially, our families kind of grew up together. They're also immigrants and things like that. So, was very much a mentor.

David Phelps: Let's speak a little bit to being an immigrant. You mentioned that a little bit in the opening and that as an immigrant, that means culturally the expectation for you is to go into levels of higher education, some kind of engineering analytics, doctor profession, lawyer. Do I have that right? Give us a little bit more insight there.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, absolutely. My parents immigrated in the seventies. I was born and raised in Southern California, and we are of Pakistani descent. There was always this, I call it brainwashing, but it was good. You have to become a doctor or a lawyer or yeah, an engineer.

Early on, I knew I wanted to do medicine. Probably initially brainwashed into thinking that, but then really grew into it, and glad that I did. But there was definitely a culture of hard work, of very high standards.

My mom was a physical therapist. My dad at the time was working at Boeing when we were young, but then started helping with the private practice that my mom was running.

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And she actually had three locations at one point, and she actually still has two locations now even though she's almost in her seventies, it's pretty incredible. She doesn't need to work, but she just enjoys it.

So, we grew up in that environment of running up and down the halls of her physical therapy clinics of having an entrepreneur. I never thought about it really until recently, it was very much a household of entrepreneurship.

She was running a medical supply business. My father was always in a real estate looking at properties. I think even for some time, he was working as an agent selling properties and whatnot. So, there was a very much a hustle culture, I think, in the family.

David Phelps: With that kind of ingrained in you from very early on, and you mentioned the two words, high standards. How do you take those high standards, the hard work ethic, the hustle, as you said — sometimes it's the hustle and the grind.

People talk about that with a lot of respect, well, hustle and grind, hustle and grind. How are you, as you're raising your children, are you reorienting that at all or how are you trying to set them up? Has that been a good thing? Is there some iterations you would make of that? I'm just very curious.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, it's hard, and this is a common theme we see, is that immigrants, or that first generation after the son of immigrants or children of immigrants, they come up or are raised with a certain attitude and energy and drive, and need that sometimes fizzles out in the following generations.

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And people are always like, “Why do we see this theme?” I mean, no judgment aside, just looking at sheer facts that you see this happen so often within communities or the immigrant experience.

I think it was — I forgot her name; I think it's Amy Chua maybe. She wrote a book, *Triple Package*. This was the *Tiger Mom*, she was trying to identify what are the key qualities that those first two generations have that result in these sorts of observations that we have.

And it was interesting, I think, I'm not going to try to requote all three because I'm a little bit blurry on them. But she looked at that and it was really fascinating. One of them was a sense of otherness. Like you recognize that you are a minority in a majority.

Another one was a sense of having something to prove, whether it's externally or internally. So, that's either extrinsic motivation or intrinsic motivation. And I remember that was true for me in high school, I went to a private high school, not in terms of being an immigrant. That was not even really on my radar.

But I didn't do well in high school. It was a very challenging private high school, and I felt the need to prove to myself that I could get good grades and perform well. But that's where a lot of that motivation came from.

For my kids, I have no idea. This is my first time raising kids. So, we'll find out in about 20 years how it goes. But I think we are trying to not at all cuddle them. We homeschool, we're constantly challenging our children to do things on their own.

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Forcing them to go into the store, buy stuff, just really cook, clean, chores, no handouts. If they want something, they got to work for it. I think I'm the soft one in the relationship. I think my wife's a little bit more strict. But for the most part, it seems to be going well. I mean, they're only 11 and 8, so we'll find out if that works.

I challenge them with businesses, entrepreneurial projects. My son had a really successful one this last year. He made like 500 bucks making treats and selling them to the school and stuff.

So, my daughter wants to make some hard candy projects. So, we try different stuff. I don't know if it's going to work. We'll find out if we're failing or winning in 20 years.

David Phelps: Yeah because it seems like the immigrant culture, as you said in a couple generations, that can just be diluted so much here in this country almost anywhere today, because we live in society of instant gratification and everything's quick and easy.

And just book your smartphone, and you can have anything you want just by using Apple Pay or whatever you want. There's no connection to what does it take to be able to do this. And so, I think it's really wise that you do that.

Let's go back; once you decided to go into dentistry, you knew what that trajectory looked like. And so, you went to school there in California, but also Michigan. Just give us a little bit of the pathway.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, fast forward, did undergrad in L.A. went to Michigan for four years. At the time senior year at dental school, I really wanted to go into oral surgery, and in reflection, now I see how everything lined up. But in reflection, I was

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actually nervous about the time commitment of doing four years and then additional six years.

So, I said, “Okay, let me start with the GPR.” I came to San Francisco, did a GPR, got a post-match scramble match. And I have a lot of appreciation and gratitude to the director of that program.

I was at that GPR for a year. I had a great time, learned so much. And then at the end of that, the opportunity came up, and I was approached by the program, and they said, “Hey, we'd love it if you apply it to our oral surgery program. We really like you, whatever.”

And I thought about it, didn't want to make that six-year commitment. And I said, “Thank you, no thank you.” And then so they said, “Okay, do you want a job? And I said, you mean here?” And they said, “Yeah.” I said, “Okay.”

So, I worked there, and I was at UCSF working in the Department of Oral Surgery, but essentially, working for the GPR Program. It was a small program, but it was a lot of fun. Had just an amazing experience there really.

I mean, the mentors there, it sort of catapulted my whole “dentistry career”. After working there for a few years, worked at the VA hospital in Palo Alto, and then took call like a part-time weekend sort of stint right across the street at Stanford.

And so, working in a number of hospitals, working with a couple different GPR programs, that was for about six, seven years. That gave me a lot of clinical experience.

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But there was a critical moment, and I think this will probably play into the theme that you're sort of bringing up. When my son was four — so I was working seven days a week between these two hospitals. I would work nine to five Monday through Friday. And then I would take call at a second hospital from Friday at 5:00 PM to Friday evening.

I would be on call till like Sunday morning, and I wasn't seeing my kids. Sometimes I'd leave early before sunrise, come back after sunset. They're already sleeping. My son was four-years-old, and he said, “Can you come home when the sun is up so we can play?”

And I was like, “Oh, checkmate.” And so, that pulled pretty hard and that was one of two events that really made me realize this is not sustainable. Kind of redlining it, even though I'm having a lot of fun doing it. That was one event.

The second event was I had a lot of friends that were, I would just say, one step ahead. Meaning they had kids that were maybe, 10 years older or I had mentors, dental practice owners that maybe owning for 10 years.

And I was always looking at, okay, what are they going through? Because I'm going to be there. They're a little bit further down the path, and I need to take their challenges and plan for them now. So, even things like how we're going to educate our children, homeschooling versus private, versus public school.

What I realized was some of the older dentists, they just didn't have a plan. And I think that's why I'm so intrigued by Freedom Founders, not to type back in, but really.

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Because so many doctors, so many solo dentists would get to that later stage in their career, and they wouldn't have a plan or their only plan was selling their office. I was like that's not a good plan.

The other type of doctor that's been working at an institution, maybe a faculty member, someone working for a large hospital, they would depend on their 401(k)s or some retirement plan.

And sure, our entire society runs on these sort of retirement plans. But at a very fundamental, sort of a core framework or a core of how that's laid out, it just still doesn't quite sit right to me. How does a society provide income for this number of people in a way that is sustainable in the long-term?

I'm not a political person, I'm not an economist, but just at a gut feeling level, I was like, “Ah, I don't know if I want to put all my eggs in that basket. Maybe I'll be contributing to my retirement stuff, but I trust my money in my own hands. I'm going to the best of my ability, God willing, do what I got to do to make sure that my family's taken care of, and I'd rather have a diverse plan of action. I don't want to get to retirement age and be dependent on some random company that's been holding my money for so long in the stock market or whatever.”

David Phelps: Yeah, I think that's really wise, and that's really the basic construct of how I figured that out after some number of years. Same as you, experiences, and then looking through the eyes of others that were ahead of me. Same thing. Just where do I want to be and what can I learn from other people?

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You certainly did that out of the gate, and having the different experiences you had, with the GPR, with the VA, taking calls, multiple practices, you really gained a lot from all that exposure.

And I think that's one of the things that oftentimes is missing for many of us, that we just go straight down a path because we've been kind of tapped on the shoulder and you can make the grades, and you can do this and just go straight through, and see there's kind of this herd mentality.

Just follow the herd right on out into ... it could be academia or it could be just right into the entrepreneurial practice or practices, whatever it is. And again, not judging any of those, but where do we have claim as individuals to really know what we want unless we get exposure?

I think there's this drive that as soon as you get your degree, your license, your certification, your right to go make money because we have to do that at some point. We have to earn income to get started in life and pay the bills and start a family.

But we get so focused on that that we can very much restrict our ability to explore. So, there's that dichotomy, and you made some choices. And then also, you just mentioned that kind of the snapping of the leash, your son saying, “Hey dad, could you come home sometime and we can actually have the sun out and we can actually play ball or something.”

So, you were doing a lot of things right, but still seeing some things that maybe you need to course correct. My real question to you is I happen to know that we're both very much introverts. I know that for a specific reason because we got kind of

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categorized when we were together at a certain fun meeting that we were at.

But we got to kind of categorized and pigeonholed and say that's us over here. So, I guess my question to you is there's a lot of us, so I'm saying there's a lot of us as introverts, we're not out there carrying a banner and life of the party, that kind of thing.

How do we as, introverts, get that exposure, that experience putting ourselves out there? Was it ever hard for you to do that? To put yourself out there into new areas? Because we tend to want to think things through and try to have that game plan all figured out. And did you ever have to wrestle with that Zahid?

Zahid Ahmed: It's a good question. I see those as being uncoupled. What I mean by that is I don't think it matters so much. Whether you're an introvert or an extrovert might affect the how of that process happens of exploring and finding opportunities, whatever.

But I think it comes down to whether or not someone has the drive and a sort of a proactive nature versus someone that doesn't have the drive or is maybe too shy. Maybe this comes to the introvert part, maybe, as you were alluding to. But maybe someone that's too shy to go and explore.

And I think that probably comes down more to risk aversion. Is the person that says, “No, I need to stay on this well-trodden path where the guidance is clear, I'm risk-averse to trying something else.” Whereas maybe I'm either cavalier or reckless or too crazy to go and just try things.

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In reflection, I've always been a little bit like that. I've been okay with trying new things. Are you familiar with the Kolbe test? I did Kolbe many years ago with Strategic Coach. That's the Dan Sullivan thing and again, with another group recently.

And the two things that always scored really high were like the fact-finder whatever score and then the visionary score. And I realized I didn't actually believe the fact finder score until I actually, really thought about it.

And I said, oh yeah, when I find something new — maybe a new industry, a new opportunity, I really dive deep into wanting to know all the details. Maybe that's the dentist in me.

But then, more than just finding out about it, I'll actually go and engage with that opportunity or domain, or something like that. And I think that's maybe just the part of me that's compelled me forward.

In terms of being an introvert, it has not served me. And one of my mentors, he hit me with this and he said, “Listen, just come and hang out.” And I said, “Okay, fine. This goes against every bone in my body.” But they're people I all appreciate and I love. They're friends and colleagues.

And so, the introvert in me has not served me well because I'm just like a homebody. I don't voluntarily go and engage or want to meet people or anything like that. So, I've always been very quiet, I guess, about how I operate. I don't know if that speaks to what you're talking about.

David Phelps: So, yeah. Well, yeah, it does. And thank you for that reflection because again, I have a lot of the same tendencies, is at some point, being around a lot of people will wear me out

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and I need to go have some of that time where I can like read a book or dig into something that I'm interested in.

So, do you find then, it's been a good thing though, to be pushed or to push yourself in some cases to go ahead and step up and do something or stay more involved in a group experience than you normally would have?

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, and I think absolutely. So, like when I was pushed to sort of my own comfort level, it's been very fruitful, obviously, super helpful. And I think it's important, again, that whatever our own frontier is, you've heard that language before — whatever the edge is of where our comfort level is, that's probably where we need to keep exploring a bit.

Because that means that we're hopefully growing and learning and experiencing new things. So, absolutely.

David Phelps: Yeah. So, that's kind of leading me up to ... and I want to get to your practice and the practice sale that happened earlier this year. Move forward a little bit in your timeline.

But yeah, I'm kind of looking at the tendency for a lot of us to be the rugged individual, kind of isolationist. I can do this thing, I've got the work ethic. In your case, I'm an immigrant, we know how to do this stuff, we can just take it all on.

But there's a point where the experience, exposure, the collaboration with, again, the right people, choosing judiciously who those people would be, can really augment your ability to really create a life that maybe can be more individualistic to yourself and what you want for your family versus just that mainstream, “Here's what it looks like, go to work.”

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You build a practice or maybe multiple practices, and yes, someday you sell those and you “retire” and hopefully, you have enough. Again, just kind of putting all that in a box.

Alright, so let's go back to, you graduated out of the GPR in what year?

Zahid Ahmed: That was 2011.

David Phelps: 2011, okay. And then take us from there as to what you did.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, so working in the hospitals and the programs, having the event, obviously with my son, I basically realized at that point around that year, that working as an employee at a hospital or institution, or school, had a ceiling.

It had an income ceiling and it had a time ceiling. And that's where I realized I was not spending my time how I wanted to. And the immediate next realization was that practice ownership, owning your own business, it doesn't have a ceiling.

So, the potential is whatever you can make of it. And so, that was just a very obvious next step. Looking back, it didn't really seem scary or intimidating, it just seemed like a lot of work.

Of course, like anything, you're nervous, you're working super hard, day and night blood, sweat and tears trying to make everything come together. It was intended to be a starter practice. I also wanted to start a practice just for personal reasons, and we can go into it or not; it doesn't matter.

But I wanted to start a practice without taking out a bank loan. So, I wanted to self-fund the startup or the purchase, because I

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had a lot of student loan debt, I had a little bit of money saved, not a lot. I was like, “Man, I don't want to take out another loan and be in more debt. I'm trying to get out of debt.”

And so, that was a big driving factor for a lot of my decision making. So, I found a hole in the wall practice. We paid 15 grand for facility purchase. It was two chairs. We updated it a little bit and we did really well. I mean, I feel really blessed, that journey was incredible.

And I knew though it was a startup practice, that was a transition practice. I knew though, that this is not going to be where I'm going to stay forever. I'm going to have to figure out the next step.

So, in my mind, it was always like, “Okay, we'll just grow, and then we will move out of this space, but we'll keep growing.” But I definitely saw practice ownership as my long-term trajectory.

And then fast-forward a few years, up until this past year, quite literally, I would say the end of ... COVID was an interesting experience, but the end of last year of 2021, that's when all these things started to just kind of emerge for me, all these opportunities. I always have side projects going on. I'm just that type. And they all fail for the most part.

I mean, I've started like I think four kind of online businesses. They do okay, but they essentially fizzle out. But they're super educational. I have all these opportunities that started coming up for me, and I realized in that moment that I should at least explore the opportunity getting out of practice ownership, so I can pursue some of these other things.

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And I didn't at all expect to sell the practice, but I put together like a sales sheet and I just kind of farmed it out to a few people in the community. I talked to a broker, but really, within a few weeks, I mean, it was kind of a done deal. It happened very, very fast.

I mean, we signed and then closed after about six weeks. So, a discussion started like January-ish around, and then I handed the keys over quite literally in the middle of March.

And it was an interesting experience. A lot of people thought I was crazy, some people still think I'm crazy. Questions from families and friends, dentists in the community said, “Hey, how are you retiring? You're too young to retire.”

And I'm like, “I'm not retiring.” But maybe I am. I'm just trying something different. I can talk more about that decision. I don't know if that's valuable.

David Phelps: Yeah, no, that's all good. And just for clarification, your sale did not require you to stay on and do any kind of earn out, which is a big part of that. Which some people are thinking, well, wait a minute, okay, I got you sold it, but aren't you still like obligated in the practice and you're not.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, I was at a point where I could expand the practice. The landlord reached out and said, “Hey, space has become available. Do you want that space?” So, we could go from three chairs to six chairs, and I'd been waiting for that for like years because I want to get bigger.

And so, that's what prompted me to say, “Okay, if I expand and I go down this road, I'm going to have to go to a much larger

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organization and be committed for another 5 or 10 years. I don't know if I want that.”

Maybe it was the pain of COVID and all the burnout that we've all been feeling as dentists. And also, the pull of opportunities outside of dentistry or beyond practice ownership.

But I looked at a bunch of options, but like a partnership with a large DSO was not an option. I did not want handcuffs. That model works for a number of people, and it's great.

I looked at it for like two days, and I said, “No way. I'm either selling and walking away, or I'm going to be all in and we're going to double this practice, and I'll be here for another 5 or 10 years minimum.”

So, it was totally dependent on selling the practice and handing over the keys, and just having a clean break, finishing up my dentistry, and having no commitment — walking away with a check, essentially. That was a hundred percent the only option.

David Phelps: So, as you're debating those two very disparate options — stay, grow as you knew you could. You definitely could, you had the opportunity. Or take the check and be done. Give us some insights. How did you weigh that?

Once you made the decision, I mean, was there still any reticence, any fear? And did you have any sleepless nights as you're coming towards the final closing? Or were you just like, “Okay, this is the right move.” And you can certainly five, six months down the road give us your reflections today, but was it in retrospect, the right move?

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Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, I would say a hundred percent the right move. And there's a number of themes there, but one essentially, was if I were to double the practice and go down that road, for the most part— I don't mean this to come across in any way that is arrogant or anything, but I kind of knew what that path looked like.

Because I was looking at my mentors and my friends that had those types of practices. Hearing about their headaches, hearing about their journey, what does it look like when they turn 40, then 50, then 60. I saw that.

I'm not reinventing the wheel, I'm just a practice owner. I know what all those headaches are going to probably be like. But I saw an opportunity outside of practice ownership, looking a lot at technology. I'm very much a nerd and a geek when it comes to technology looking at software as a service, online services, things like that.

I saw that and I had a lot of pull into that as being a frontier in the same way that I went from an employee in a hospital position to a practice owner with no ceiling. I saw going from a practice owner to entrepreneurship as the next step of no ceiling.

And it's not just about income, because I think a mistake that a lot of us make is that we're just chasing a dollar. And anyone that has any degree of income or assets, they'll quickly realize it's not about just the money.

The money, you can swap money for time to some degree. It can create obviously, ease, and comfort in your life. There's no

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complaints and I feel very blessed and thankful for having some of that.

But if you put that as your primary goal or your end, you're not going to be happy. You're not going to be satisfied. The goalpost is going to move. You're going to constantly want more. And so, what I realized though was that time with family, with my children was ultimately the goal.

And I also realized, again from people that were older than me, I only have a certain amount of time when they're between the ages of 8 to 14. I assume around 14 to 15, they're not going to want to spend time with me anymore. Hopefully, not. But still.

So, I have a finite time window with my children, but I also have a small window with myself and my age. If I'm reaching the end of my 30s, I'm coming up on 40, okay, maybe like 35 to 55 is going to be maybe my most productive time, I'm not sure. And then around like 50 to 70 is going to be, hopefully, I'll have more assets and wealth and things like that that I can lean on.

But I said, “Okay, if I burn another 5 or 10 years in this expanded practice, what does that leave for that 50s range?” Am I just going to grow capital and wealth and then maybe invest into real estate and do that route? That's fine.

Or is now the time in my late 30s coming up to 40, is this next 5 to 10 years the time where I think about starting a software business or many businesses? Or do I just flip practices? There's other things that I would want to explore and try that if I fail, I still have time to recover.

So, having a solo practice, I don't mean for this to come across as brass, but it's kind of a safety net. We're in a very

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comfortable profession. Thankfully, as a professional, you can work in almost any state. You can go almost anywhere in the world and work as a dentist. So, I had that comfort, and that's what allowed me to not have sleepless nights.

And also, of course, as you sell, you're advancing your income. Your income for the next few years is now advanced into your checking account and now, you need to plan accordingly.

Obviously, you don't want to just use that ... your burn rate is important, your daily income or your expenses are important. So, you don't just want to use that money. You want to reinvest that money into something else.

You want it to multiply into something more. But with proper planning, you can create a lot of time and space, which is what I'm trying to do. Is that too abstract? I don't mean to be ...

David Phelps: No, no, no, no, no. I think it was very well said. I agree with you. I agree with you a hundred percent. But like many, I didn't see it that way when I was younger. I was chasing that higher dollar per hour and not really taking the opportunity to carve out the time at those times in my life just like you are.

When your kids are a certain age, God willing, every year, they grow older — that year, whether they're 8-years-old or 10-years-old, that particular year has an endpoint, and then it's on to the next year. They're all different years, but they go by very, very quickly.

I think what I'm sensing from you is because you're very curious, you choose different domains outside of your primary one that you went in for training, which is dentistry, but even

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there, you gave yourself the opportunity to have a lot of exposure.

You didn't go down six years of oral surgery residency. You could have easily done that. Well, not easily — I mean it was work. But you could have done that, but you chose again, to take experiences.

And I think to me, just knowing you as much as I do, that absolved the fear factor a lot of people would have about that safety net. Well, if I give up this one place that I know that I'm comfortable, I show up every day, and I can make a certain amount of money just by being there, that's kind of solving the same problem over and over again.

And yes, you can increase your skillset and technology and services to patients, and that's fun and that's great. But I think you're a person who you like to find new problems to solve. And with this wide range of experience and exposure, you're very adaptable. You're a very adaptable person.

And I think you also, you've kept your burn rate for your lifestyle, your family's lifestyle at a modicum of a level that gives you even more of that flexibility.

Again, not judging. Some people like certain things in life, and that's important to them. But I think again, there's a handcuffing that causes some people, if you get too high up on the lifestyle just because you can and you work hard enough and you deserve it if that's what you want.

But on the other side, what kind of trap does that create, particularly in those years of family that are growing right before our eyes?

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Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, no, no, that's a good point. And this all goes without saying, this just happens to be my path. It's not necessarily the only path or the right path. And I don't mean to be in any way knocking practice ownership. I mean, it's fantastic.

Most of all the people that I have great respect for have amazing practices, and I don't know that I could even do what they're doing. But I think creating that freedom and making sure that that burn rate is low was not something that was born out of like an explicit intention.

Like, “Okay, we want to live whatever, simply, or something.” I think what it was is we had really heavy student loans. My wife didn't have any student loans thankfully. But my student loans were such a burden that I had a limited salary through the hospitals I was working at.

We had to really just be careful about how we spent. And living in the Bay Area, it's very expensive. I think maybe just for the first 10 years out, we just kind of got used to living simply.

And thankfully, I have a super gracious wife. She's the everything in our relationship. She's the smart one, but she also doesn't have very high demands or high needs. I don't know how else to say that. We're okay living simply.

And so, having that low cost-of-living, relatively speaking, has been very helpful. Of course, not a lot of consumer debt, if any. I don't really think we have any. That has allowed a freedom to explore and try new things, and make mistakes.

David Phelps: Yeah, that's a key to be willing to make mistakes to try things, to test things. Having enough margin so you can do that is a key.

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Well, we can keep this conversation going a long time. I love this. I'll probably have to have you come back because there's some rabbit holes we could definitely dive into.

Just to kind of round it out today, you still have the opportunity to do some dentistry. You're doing some dentistry. So, it's not like you just hung up the hand piece ... yeah, tell us about that.

Zahid Ahmed: Yeah, I actually love dentistry, and I was joking before I was talking about there's nothing more that I like pulling a tooth and placing an implant.

But right now, I'm doing some in-office teaching around the Bay Area, helping doctors incorporate surgery either exodontia or implantology in other offices. That's been really fun, “a quiet business” as I would call it. So, I do that a couple days a week.

I've got software we're going to be launching in a couple of weeks, so that's a fun project. It's a SaaS product. And I'm helping a local institution with their tech stack. They've kind of invited me to revamp some of the technologies they use to run their organization. And so, finding solutions to their problems has been a lot of fun. But dentistry will be at my core.

It comes back to something that Mark Costes, the idea that he introduced me to is practicing dentistry because you want to practice it. It should be a choice, not a necessity. And so, I love dentistry, I'm a dental nerd, but it'd be nice to practice it on my own terms, I guess, as long as I can, God willing.

David Phelps: And so, how often do you get home before the sun goes down to play ball with your son?

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Zahid Ahmed: I'm home before they get home from school or I'll go pick them up. So, I feel very blessed that that part has been achieved.

David Phelps: Best of the best. Zahid, thank you so much for your time today. We'll definitely do some follow-up because there's some additional provocations that I think came out during our discussion today that would be fun to go into. So, we'll definitely have you back. So, thank you for being with us today.

Zahid Ahmed: Thank you so much. It was an honor, and I appreciate it.

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