



EPISODE 5 · SITES I'VE NEVER SEEN

# The five-principle spine

---

- FOR** anyone who teaches, speaks, or trains in technical fields and wants to see what their through-line actually is
- FROM** *Sites I've Never Seen*, Episode 5 — "What 15 WordCamp Talks Taught Me About WordPress Careers"
- TIME REQUIRED** one afternoon, with access to your last decade of work

The idea behind this exercise is what Edie surfaces in the episode: across fifteen years and eighteen WordCamp deliveries, only five principles stayed constant. I'd been telling myself a story about evolution — about changing my mind across decades. I had been changing my mind, in detail, about a lot of things. But the spine never moved.

Kenji's framing landed it: *most practitioners have portfolios. Some of them have careers. The difference is the through-line, and the through-line is the part you can't fake or assemble retroactively.*

This is a structured way to find your own spine, if you want to see it.

---

## Step 1 — Inventory the work

---

Pull every public talk, workshop, training session, or major presentation you've delivered in the last 10+ years. For each one, note:

- Year, venue, audience
- Title and a one-sentence summary of the argument
- One thing the talk wanted the room to take away

Don't filter. Include the early ones you're embarrassed by. Include the ones that didn't land. Include the ones that pivoted from your usual lane. The pattern matters more than the prestige.

---

## Step 2 — Read it back

---

The hardest part of this exercise is reading the work back to yourself. We're inside our own work; we see what we were trying to do, not what we actually did. The trick is to read it like a biographer would — somebody trying to find the through-line, not somebody trying to justify the choices.

Look for what didn't change:

- **The audience you reached for** — were you talking to beginners, peers, decision-makers? Did that shift, or did it stay constant?
  - **The register** — formal, conversational, instructional, contrarian? Did the register move?
  - **The kinds of arguments you made** — "here's how to do X," "here's why most people get X wrong," "here's a story about X"?
  - **The closing move** — did you end with a tool, a question, a call to action, a permission?
  - **The metaphors you reach for repeatedly** — these are usually the clearest spine signal
-

## Step 3 — Name the principles

---

The exercise produces a list of five to seven principles that held across the whole record. Christopher's came out as:

1. **Helpful neighbour over sales pitch.** The talks were never selling something; they were giving away what would have made his job easier ten years earlier.
2. **Plain language over jargon.** When a technical term wanted to enter the talk, it had to earn its place. The audience could be senior practitioners or first-time visitors; the language stayed accessible to both.
3. **Free as possible.** Whatever the talk taught, the practical version was something the audience could implement without buying a tool from him.
4. **Practical over impressive.** The talks didn't try to demonstrate sophistication. They tried to make the next week of work easier for somebody in the room.
5. **Comfortable with constraint.** The bigger the technology trend, the smaller the principle. Don't chase the framework du jour; chase the principle that survives the next framework.

Your five will be different. The pattern of finding them is the same.

---

## Step 4 — The self-check

---

For each principle on your list, ask:

- Would the work I'm doing right now still be recognizable to the person who shipped my earliest talks under this principle?
- Is there a recent piece of work that broke this principle? What was the cost?
- Would my future self recognize today's work as coming from the same person who held this principle ten years ago?

This isn't a guilt exercise. It's a calibration exercise. The principles you can hold are the ones that survive being named. The ones you can't hold anymore are also useful to know — they tell you the next decade's argument.

---

## Step 5 — Write the contract

---

In a `SPINE.md` file (or wherever you keep your professional notes), record:

- Date of this exercise
- The five (or whatever number) principles you found
- The work that surprised you most when read back
- The one principle that took the longest to see

The act of writing it down is the contract. The next time you're considering a new direction — a job, a project, a talk title — you can read it back to yourself the way Edie read Christopher's talks back to him. If the new direction breaks the spine, that's information. If the new direction is consistent with the spine but in a different register, that's a career growing along its own line.

---

## When to do this

---

Once a decade is enough for most practitioners. Mid-career (years 8-12) is the most productive moment for the first pass — you've shipped enough work that the pattern is visible, and you have enough career left to act on what you find.

If you're earlier (years 3-7), do the inventory but don't expect a clean pattern yet. The pattern emerges in retrospect; the work creates the pattern, not the other way around.

If you're later (years 15+), do this exercise the year before any major transition — a sabbatical, a pivot, a new role, retirement. The spine is the thing you want to carry forward into whatever's next.

---

*Built to go with [episode 5](https://thisismyurl.com/podcast/15-wordcamp-talks/) of *Sites I've Never Seen*, and the source essay [What 15 WordCamp Talks Taught Me About WordPress Careers](https://thisismyurl.com/15-years-of-wordcamp-talks-a-wordpress-career-arc/).*

**LISTEN TO THE EPISODE**

## **What 15 WordCamp Talks Taught Me About WordPress Careers**

Built to go with episode five of *Sites I've Never Seen*. The episode is where the argument lands; this is what you take into the next meeting.

[Listen to the episode](#)   [Read the source essay](#)   [Send me a note](#)