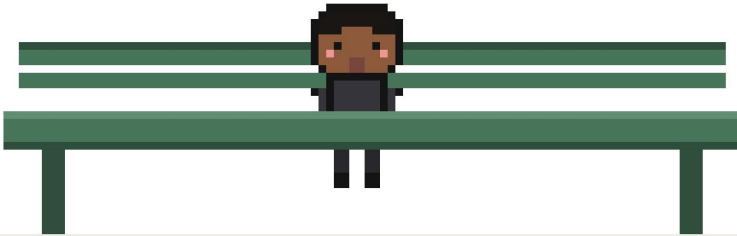




PREVIEW EDITION

MICHAEL
HI. WELCOME TO THE
PREVIEW OF MY BOOK.



The Traffic Light Method *for Communication*

the opening chapter, free to read and share

Michael Brookman-Aikins

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This preview may be shared freely, unmodified. Full book out 13 December.

There was a night I don't talk about much.

Not because it was dramatic. Not because anything physical happened. But because of who I became in that moment or more accurately, who I didn't recognise.

I was trying to survive a moment that my nervous system had decided was dangerous, even though nobody was in danger.

That was Red.

from Chapter One

The Traffic Light Method

for communication



Michael Brookman-Aikins

This book is about the states we move through when conversation becomes conflict, and what it costs to stay in one of them.

First published in 2026

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This book reflects the author's experience and research. It is not a substitute for professional mental health care, therapy, or medical advice. If you are struggling, please reach out to a qualified professional.

The voices set in the outer margins of this book are survey respondents, quoted from their written answers.

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Typeset in Literata.

For the you that burns,
the you that goes quiet,
and the you still learning
that the way back exists.

This is for you.

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Author's Note

I'm not a therapist. I'm not a psychologist. I don't have letters after my name or a research background that qualifies me to tell you how to feel or what your relationships mean.

I'm just someone who paid attention.

I paid attention when things went wrong, in my own life, in my own relationships, in the moments where I said something I didn't mean or stayed quiet when I should have spoken or found myself, at some unreasonable hour of the night, still turning the same conversation over in my hands trying to find the part I had missed. I paid attention when I started to see the same patterns repeating, not just in me, but in the people around me. Friends. Strangers. People who had never met each other describing, almost word for word, the same internal experience.

And at some point I stopped thinking it was coincidence and started thinking it was something worth understanding.

That's where this book came from. Not from a curriculum. Not from a methodology. From the quiet, persistent, sometimes uncomfortable work of trying to understand what was actually

happening inside people, including me, when connection became difficult.

I'll tell you something about myself, because I think it matters for how you read what follows.

For most of my life I've turned inward. Not because I don't value people, I do, deeply, but because I've learned, through experience rather than theory, that the most reliable thing available to me is what I build within myself. I've been let down. I've forgiven. I've moved forward. I've chosen, each time, not to let the letting down become the definition. And in that process I've developed a trust in my own judgment, about what is real, about what matters, about what deserves my energy and what doesn't, that I wouldn't trade for anything.

That means I don't do things because everyone else does. I don't accept that something is right just because it's common. I look at people as individuals first, I give them that space, genuinely, until their behaviour shows me something different. And I've noticed, looking at people that way, that most of them are not the problem they think they are. They're not broken. They're not difficult beyond repair. They're in states, states they didn't entirely choose, states that were shaped by experiences they didn't entirely control, and they're doing the best they can with a map that nobody gave them.

This book is an attempt at that map.

The Traffic Light Method is not a technique, and not a system you apply to other people in order to manage them more effectively. It is a language, a

simple, honest, human language for naming what is happening inside you, and inside the person in front of you, in the moments that matter most. Red. Yellow. Green. You already know all three. You've felt them your whole life. What you may not have had, until now, is the word for them while they're happening.

That word, that moment of recognition in the middle of the difficulty, is where everything in this book begins.

I collected data. I gathered responses from people across different ages, backgrounds, and relationship types, asking them about conflict, about silence, about what safety felt like and what it looked like in the people who created it for them. What came back was not surprising in its content, it was surprising in its consistency. The loop people run alone at night. The question *did I do something wrong* that appears across almost every demographic as the first internal response to sensed tension. The physical relief of being genuinely heard. The particular loneliness of being in a relationship and still processing it entirely alone.

These are not niche experiences. They are human ones.

And human experiences, however painful, are never beyond the reach of understanding.

I won't pretend this book has all the answers. I'm still learning too, still catching myself in Yellow when I should have spoken, still noticing Red arriving before I was ready, still building the

capacity for Green that I believe, more than almost anything, is worth the work it requires. This book was written from inside that process, not from the other side of it.

What I can tell you is this: understanding changes something. It doesn't change everything, and it doesn't protect you from other people's states, or guarantee that honesty will always be received well, or promise that the relationships that matter most will hold every truth you need to bring to them. But it changes the relationship to the experience. It removes the layer of confusion that makes everything harder than it needs to be. It gives you something to stand on when the ground shifts.

That is what I wanted to give you when I started writing this.

Not certainty. Not resolution. Just a slightly clearer view of what is happening, in you, in the people you are trying to reach, so that the next time you are in the middle of something difficult, you have a word for it. And with the word, just enough space to choose what comes next.

That space is small at first.

But it grows.

This book is for anyone who has ever stayed quiet when they needed to speak, spoken when they needed to stay quiet, or stood in the middle of a conversation wondering how something so important became so hard.

That's most of us. More often than we admit.

You're in the right place.



Red

*Where the temperature changes before
you notice. Where the words become less
about what is being said, and more about
what is not. Where the person who shows
up does not quite feel like you.*

Red: The Body's Alarm System

There was a night I don't talk about much.

Not because it was dramatic. Not because anything physical happened. But because of who I became in that moment or more accurately, who I didn't recognise.

We were in the middle of what had started as a conversation. One of those conversations that begins quietly, almost reasonably, and then somewhere between the first sentence and the fifth, something shifts. The temperature changes. The words become less about what's being said and more about what isn't being said. And before I could catch it, before I could name what was happening inside me, I was somewhere else entirely.

Not in the room. Not in my body. Not in the conversation.

I was in a place that had no patience, no curiosity, no interest in being understood. I was operating from somewhere much older and much less rational than the version of me I thought I was. I said things I didn't mean with a certainty I didn't feel. I wasn't trying to resolve anything. I wasn't trying to connect. I was trying to survive a

moment that my nervous system had decided was dangerous, even though nobody was in danger.

That was Red.

I didn't know that at the time. I just knew I didn't like who had shown up.

What Red Actually Is

Before we go any further, let's be clear about something: Red is not a character flaw.

It is not evidence that you are difficult, immature, volatile, or broken, not something that only certain kinds of people experience, and not a sign that you are bad at relationships or incapable of healthy communication.

Red is a state. A nervous system state. One that every human being on the planet has experienced, is experiencing, or will experience, usually in the context of something they care about.

The traffic light metaphor is simple for a reason. We all understand what a red light means before we ever think about it. Stop! Danger ahead! Not safe to proceed! Your nervous system works the same way. When it perceives a threat, whether that threat is physical, emotional, or entirely imagined, it activates. It floods your body with signals. It narrows your focus. It removes your access to nuance, empathy, and careful thinking, and it replaces all of that with one single instruction: *protect yourself*.

The problem is that most of the conflict we experience in relationships is not actually

dangerous. Nobody is going to be harmed. But the body doesn't know that. The body is responding to patterns, to tone of voice, to a particular look on someone's face, to something in the air that resembles a previous time when things were not okay. And so it fires anyway!

This is not weakness. It is a biological response. Understanding it, not only intellectually but through what happens in your body, is the first step towards changing how you show up.

What Red Feels Like From The Inside

When I put that question to people, *when you're in conflict and feel overwhelmed or defensive, what are the first signs you notice in yourself?* The responses came back faster and more honestly than almost anything else.

Increased heart rate, tense muscles, a heaviness in the chest. Irritability that arrives before thought, a heat in the face with legs that feel hollow and a sudden and complete inability to find the right words, or any words at all.

And then something that surprised me: many people described not heat, but coldness. Not an explosion, but disappearance. Shutting down, dissociating and leaving the room without moving.

Being present in body but absent in every way that mattered.

This is important, because when we talk about Red, most people imagine someone who raises their

A numb feeling
in your legs, like
you've got no blood
going to them. I'm
pretty sure that can
be anxiety though.

voice. Someone who lashes out, who escalates, who becomes visibly reactive. And yes, that is Red.

But so is the person who goes completely silent. So is the person who smiles politely and feels nothing inside. So is the person who leaves the conversation by pretending to still be in it.

Red is not one thing. It is a range of responses to the same underlying experience: *I do not feel safe right now.*

What form that takes depends on your history, your nervous system, your previous experiences of conflict, and what you learned, often very early in life about what happens when things get difficult. Some people learned that the way to stay safe was to get louder. Others learned that the way to stay safe was to get quieter. Neither response was chosen consciously. Both were learned. And both, under the right or wrong circumstances, can hijack the person you're trying to be.

The Moment You Surprise Yourself

Here is one of the questions that stayed with me the longest in the responses I gathered for this book:

Have you ever said or done something in conflict that surprised you, something that didn't feel like "you"? What happened?

Many people said yes.

One contributor described raising their voice on a football pitch, words coming out before they could catch them, from a person who considered themselves quiet and reserved. Another talked about throwing something, not at anyone, just into the room and standing there afterwards, confused by their own hands. Several people described physical aggression they had never shown before or since, in a relationship they now recognise as toxic. Another talked about crying and walking away, when they had always thought of themselves as someone who handled things calmly.

One response stayed with me more than the rest. This person wrote:

I was never a dissociative person. I naturally fight. However, over the years of feeling powerless, I have made myself dissociate to protect myself. But I know it's not me.

The final line stayed with me.

I know it's not me.

That line captures the point of this chapter. What appears in Red, whether rage or shutdown, aggression or disappearance, is real, but it is not the full truth of who you are. It is a form of protection, shaped over time by experiences that taught you that honest expression was not safe.

The behaviour that surprises you is not a revelation of your true character. It is a signal: your body is telling you that something underneath needs attention not punishment, not suppression, but attention.

Why Red Arrives Before You're Ready

There's a reason you can't think your way out of Red while you're in it.

When you become highly activated, access to language, nuance, long-term thinking and empathy can narrow. The thoughtful, considered part of you may become harder to reach in that moment.

This is why you can know, intellectually, that raising your voice won't help and do it anyway. This is why you can know that silence is making things worse and still not be able to speak. This is why the thing you said in that argument last week, the thing you're still cringing about, happened.

You were not in full possession of yourself. You were in Red.

Knowing this does not excuse the behaviour but it does explain it, and explanation without blame is where change begins.

Several people who responded described how long it took them to come down from an intense emotional reaction. For some it was minutes. For others, hours. For some it lasted days and one person noted that even when it seemed resolved on the surface, the residue could return in a different

argument weeks later, carrying the unfinished business of what was never properly processed.

This is what happens when Red doesn't get acknowledged.

It doesn't disappear. It waits.

What Helps You Move Through It

Something else that came through clearly from people across different ages, backgrounds, and relationship types was this: few people described being able to move through Red entirely alone.

What helped them was not being pushed to respond before they were ready. Not being made to feel judged or blamed for the state they were in. Being given space not silence as punishment, but space as permission. And in many cases, the turning point came when the other person softened, when someone showed vulnerability instead of escalating, when the temperature dropped, even slightly, and suddenly there was enough oxygen in the room to breathe again.

One person put it simply:

When I am given space or time to cool down.
That's it. That's all I need.

Another described something that took me a while to sit with: *When the other person softens or shows vulnerability.* Because what that suggests is that Red is not just about what's happening inside you. It's also about what it's like to be opposite you. And

It might all feel
fine and come back
later on in another
situation.

sometimes the fastest way to bring someone back from Red is not to argue better, not to stay calmer in a demonstrative way, not to win the logic but simply to let your guard down first.

That takes courage.

Especially when you're in your own version of Red.

A Note on No One Being the Bad Person

I want to say something clearly before we go further, because it matters.

In the night I described at the beginning of this chapter, the one I don't talk about much, there was no villain. Not me. Not the other person. There were two people, both in states they hadn't chosen, both responding to something older than the argument they were having, both doing the best they could with what they had access to in that moment.

That framing doesn't erase consequences. Things said in Red can leave marks that take time to heal. Patterns of Red can erode trust, create distance, and eventually make repair feel impossible. None of that is trivial.

But the story of *who was wrong* is almost never the useful story. The useful story is *what was each person feeling, what were they protecting, and what would have needed to be different for a different outcome to have been possible?*

That's the story I aim to tell with this book.

Red is not a character judgement. It is a signal that something felt unsafe. Your job, the work that this chapter is inviting you to begin, is to start learning your own signals. To start noticing the moment Red begins to arrive, before it has fully taken over. Not to prevent it, you cannot always prevent it. But to recognise it, to name it and in naming it, to create just enough space between the feeling and the behaviour to make a different choice.

That space is small at first. But it grows.



Reflection: Before You Move On

These are questions I ask myself. You do not have to write them down, but sit with them honestly.

- 1 What does Red feel like in your body? Where do you feel it first?
- 2 Is your Red loud, or quiet? Do you go toward conflict, or away from it?
- 3 Think of a time you surprised yourself in conflict. What were you protecting in that moment?
- 4 What does the person opposite you need to do or stop doing for you to feel safe enough to come back?

There are no right answers. There is only the truth of your own experience. And that truth, however uncomfortable, is the beginning of something better.

The next chapter explores what happens when Red stops being a reaction and becomes a habit, when protection turns into a pattern, and the cost of that pattern on the people we're closest to.



That's the end of the preview.

And Red has only just begun. What happens when protection turns reactive, two more states, and the way back: still waiting.

LITTLE MICHAEL
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