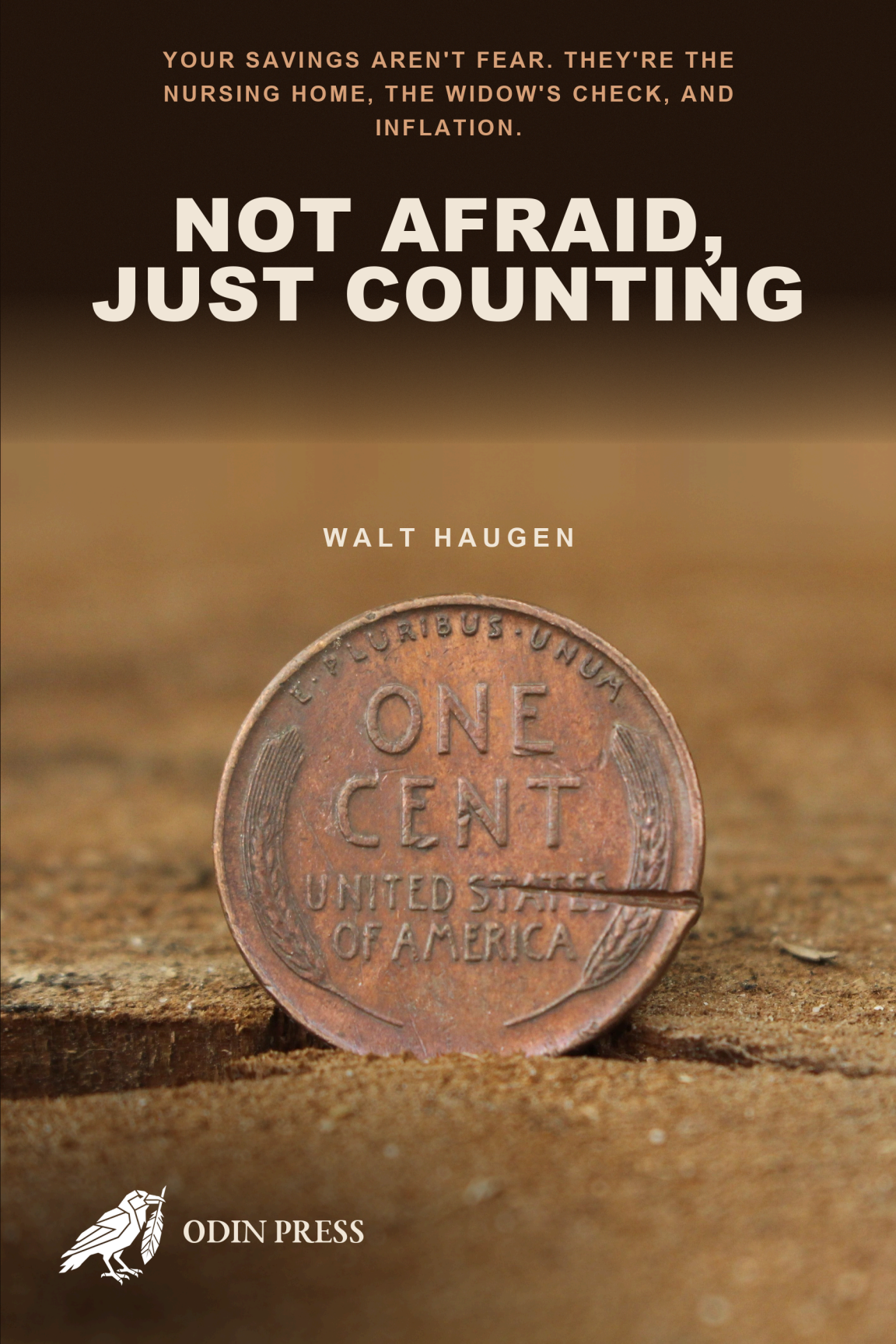
YOUR SAVINGS AREN'T FEAR. THEY'RE THE NURSING HOME, THE WIDOW'S CHECK, AND INFLATION.

NOT AFRAID, JUST COUNTING

WALT HAUGEN



ODIN PRESS

Not Afraid, Just Counting

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Preface

For thirty years I did other people's returns, and a good many of those people were retired. They came in every February with an envelope of statements, and I could tell them, to the dollar, what the year had paid and what it had cost. Most of them spent less than they could have. Lately they have been told why: that they are afraid.

I do not think that is the right word for most of them. I sat across the desk from them. When I asked what the money was for, they told me, in plain words: a bed in a care home someday, enough for whichever of them was left, groceries at prices nobody could guess. Those are not fears. They are bills that have not come in yet. I watched my own mother pay two of them.

This book takes the charge seriously, because it comes from a serious book and some of it is true. Some people do hold on too long, out of habit or out of feeling, and die with money they meant to enjoy. Where the evidence runs that way I have put it in. But most of the careful people I knew were counting, and the counting can be done in the open: what each of the three bills is likely to cost, who pays it, and what a guaranteed paycheck does and does not cover. When the count is done, what is left over is yours to spend or give away, without anybody's permission and without guilt.

Every number in the book comes from a public source, named where it appears and listed at the back. Rules and amounts change, Social Security's and Medicare's and the tax tables' most

of all, so each one carries its year. Check the current figure before you lean on it.

One caution, because it is your money and your house. This book is not financial, tax or legal advice for your situation, and it does not tell you to buy, keep or cancel any particular product. Take your own numbers to someone you pay by the hour, who sells you nothing, and do the count together.

Walt Haugen

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1

Accused of Being Afraid

If someone has told you lately that you are too careful with your money, that you are holding it out of fear and ought to loosen your grip, sit down a minute before you decide they are right.

I kept the books and filed the tax returns of northeast Iowa for thirty years. Every February my oldest clients came in with a passbook and a pension stub. They were in their eighties, and the principal was untouched. Some of their children had told them they were afraid. Later, some of their advisers told them the same thing. I did their returns, so I knew what they were holding the money against, because they had told me, in plain words, across my desk: the home, the other one's check, the price of everything. They were not afraid. They were counting. Some of them also held on too long, and I knew that too.

This autumn the charge came back with a publisher behind it. A new book, billed as a bestseller and written with AARP, tells careful retirees that they underspend out of fear, and that a guaranteed paycheck will let them spend more and worry less. A whole movement says something like it. The charge is older than all of them. Cicero, whose line stands at the front of this book, could not see why an old man would want more money for the road the less road he had left.

The question is fair, and it deserves a count, not a verdict. Here is how I would put it to you: when a careful retiree keeps money back, is that fear, or is it counting?

The answer is worth money. If it is fear, the cure is permission, and a paycheck may supply it. If it is counting, the cure is a price list, because the bills are real and a paycheck does not pay all of them. Spend on the wrong answer and the bill comes anyway, late, when you can least meet it. Hold on for the wrong reason and you die with money you meant to enjoy, and the people who called you afraid turn out to have been right about you.

I am against nothing in these pages but not counting. Get a pencil.

The Verdict on the Thrifty

Start with the book itself, because a charge deserves to be heard in full before anyone answers it, and because the woman who wrote this one is no fool and should not be read as one.

The book is *The Forever Paycheck: The New Retirement Strategy to Spend More, Worry Less, and Never Run Out of Money*, by Jean Chatzky. Avery put it on sale on September 8, 2026: 384 pages in hardcover, at $32.00. The publisher's page says it was written in collaboration with AARP, and it heads the description by calling the book an instant New York Times bestseller. On the same page sits a blurb from Bill Perkins, the author of *Die With Zero*, praising it. Two of the best-known voices for spending in retirement are on the same side of the table, and they are not shy about it.

The publisher's description is the case in short form. Retirees, it says, often cannot bring themselves to spend. When money arrives as a steady monthly paycheck, they feel much more confident using it. Many of them, it says, find they can spend twice as much with no risk of running out, and the reader is promised a way to spend more, often twice what they had expected, whatever they start with. It adds that new research links a lifetime paycheck to better health, lower chances of disability and a substantially longer life. It names no study for that and gives no

number. It also promises guidance on when to claim Social Security, by marital status, work history and age, and on whether to help grown children now or leave them an inheritance later.

Chatzky gave her own summary of the book on September 16, 2026, in a short piece for the Next Big Idea Club's magazine, the kind where an author sets out the handful of ideas a reader should carry away. She gives five. The pension disappeared and nothing replaced it: the shift to 401(k) plans began about 40 years ago, and the Pension Protection Act of 2006 let employers enroll workers automatically, raise their contributions automatically and default them into target-date funds. Saving and spending are different games. You need not be rich to build a lifetime paycheck. A steady paycheck can add years to your life. And the real risk, the one she ends on, is never spending what you saved.

That fifth idea is the charge. In her telling the careful retiree is not prudent. She is stuck. She learned to save, got good at it, and cannot make herself switch to the other game.

Her remedy is more moderate than her headline, and a fair reader has to say so before saying anything else. She does not tell anyone to put everything into an annuity. She recommends converting typically a quarter to a third of savings into income, and she names two ways to do it: buy the income, which means an annuity, or build it from investments. The aim is that this income plus Social Security covers all of a household's needs and most of its important wants. She says she has annuitized part of her own portfolio, after earlier doubts about annuities. In an excerpt from the book that AARP published on July 27, 2026, she puts delaying Social Security to age 70 first among the ways to build a paycheck. She warns against buying too much annuity. She says annuity income plus Social Security should cover fixed expenses. And she tells readers to keep other money for emergencies, because getting a lump sum back out of an annuity can be costly or impossible.

3

When One Check Stops

If you are married, go to the drawer where the Social Security statements are kept and bring both of them to the kitchen table, yours and your spouse's. Lay them side by side. Find the monthly figure on each. One of those two numbers is going to stop. It will not shrink. It will stop, the month one of you dies, and a household that has run on two checks will run on one.

I sat across that table from the one who opens the mailbox afterward. For 30 years I did the tax returns of a county in northeast Iowa: the couples while they worked, the same couples after they quit, and then, a winter or two after a funeral, the return of the one who was left. I know what that return looks like beside the ones before it. The income line falls. The property tax line does not move. The furnace has never once asked how many people it was heating.

This is the second of the three bills, and most couples never write it down, because writing it down means deciding, at the kitchen table, which of you goes first. Nobody wants to do that sum. I am going to ask you to do it anyway, both ways, with a pencil. You need three things from this chapter: which check stops, what the one left behind still has to pay, and where, years earlier, a signature on a form settled how much of the bill the survivor would carry. The careful people I worked for were holding money back against exactly this. They were not afraid of it. They had

watched it happen down the road, and they had done the subtraction.

The Smaller Check

The last chapter ended in the room at the end of the hall, with the spend-down and the house standing as the last reserve. That room ends the way it ends. When it holds a husband or a wife, the one who drives home from it for the last time comes back to the house, to whatever the spend-down did not take, and to one check. This chapter is about that check. This bill so often follows the first one, and it arrives in a household that has usually been counting for years already: one spouse dies, and one Social Security check stops.

In my own family the order ran the other way. I will tell it the way it happened.

My father died in 2011, at 81. He had owned the hardware store on the main street for 19 years and finished his working life behind a paint counter for wages, and he left my mother the house, what the sale of the store building had brought, and two Social Security checks coming into one account every month. Within the month one of those checks stopped. My mother kept the larger one, his, and lost her own. Nobody at the Social Security office made a mistake. The rule says so, and it was applied exactly as written.

What did not stop was everything else. The property tax bill came in at the same amount. The furnace ran the same hours through the same winter. The car insurance renewed at the same premium, because the car did not know it had one driver now. The church envelope went into the plate at the same size every Sunday. I watched her household lose a check and keep its bills, and I was the one person in the county who could see both halves of that on paper.

The return I did for her the following winter was still a joint return, the last one; the law lets a widow file jointly for the year her husband died. The year after, I did her first return as a single filer, and I watched a dollar of her income cost her more in tax than the same dollar had cost the two of them. She said nothing about it. She put the difference on a line in her checkbook and kept going.

I have thought about that line in her checkbook ever since. She did not call it a widow's penalty or a survivor's gap. She did not call it anything. She wrote it down and absorbed it, because she had something to absorb it with. That is most of this chapter, in one line of one checkbook. The rest is arithmetic, and you should have the arithmetic, because some of the women whose returns I did had nothing to absorb it with, and they did not get to write it down and keep going. Some of them had to sell the house.

Here is the rule, from the Social Security Administration's own pages. When a widow is eligible both for a survivor's benefit on her husband's record and for a retirement benefit on her own, Social Security pays her the larger of the two. It does not pay both. The agency's survivor page says in plain words that the two payments are not added together, and its pamphlet on survivors' benefits, revised in April 2026, says she receives a combination of benefits that comes to the higher amount. Read that slowly, because it is the whole mechanism. A couple drawing two checks becomes a widow drawing one, and the one she draws is the bigger of the two they had. The smaller check is the one that stops.

People are often surprised by this, and I understand why. Each of them paid in. Each of them has a statement with a number on it. It feels as though two people who each earned a benefit should leave the survivor with something from both. But the survivor's benefit was never designed as an inheritance of the dead spouse's check on top of her own. It was designed as a replacement: in place of her own check, she can take one based on his, and she keeps whichever is larger. Either way, one check.

COUNT THE THREE BILLS. THEN SPEND THE REST.

You have been told you are too careful: that retirees sit on their savings out of fear, and that a guaranteed paycheck would set them free to spend.

Walt Haugen did retirees' tax returns for thirty years, and he asked them what the money was for. The answer was not fear. It was three bills that had not come in yet.

The nursing home: more than half of Americans turning 65 will need serious long-term care, and Medicare does not pay for custodial care. The widow's check: when one spouse dies, Social Security pays the survivor one check, never both, while the bills barely change. And inflation: a fixed $1,000 a month from 1996 buys less than half of what it bought then.

Not Afraid, Just Counting gives the case for spending more its due. Then it shows what a guaranteed paycheck covers and what it leaves out, where the cheapest one is sold, and how to price the three bills on one page. What the count leaves free is yours, to spend or give away with a clear conscience.

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