FT:-Paul Sullivan, welcome to So Money. Congratulations on the 'Thin Green Line'.

PS: Thanks very much and thanks for taking the time to chat with me.

FT: Absolutely. I've wanted to have you on since your publisher sent me the galley for your book. I thought, "Perfect." I've actually talked about you with Gretchen Rubin who has been on the show. You know, she has a book about habits, and she's a fan of your as well, and I've had Ron Lieber on the show who is a colleague of yours at the New York Times.

Let's talk about the 'Thin Green Line'. I'm fixated on the word 'Thin'. Is that to say--the difference between those have financial security, and they're wealthy with security in their lives, and those who are the opposite, don't have financial security are financially fragile. That the line is thin and therefore going back and forth is something that can happen overnight and can be something that on the positive side, that you can be financially insecure and then secure relatively quickly.

PS: Absolutely. And I think, you know, when I came up the title, I'd never visualized it as a straight line either vertical or horizontal. I visualized it much more as sort of it's on the S&P 500 Returns over the past 50 years. They start kind of low and they chart their way up and, you know, I always thought of it as you can be at the modest part of the 'Thin Green Line', or toward the beginning of the return, or you can be on the rich part. Rich as, you know, we traditionally define it.

But the key was to be on, you know, the top of that line. As if you're standing on that line as being 500 chart no matter how much money you have. At that point, you know, the way I look at it, that's when you have control of your life and life doesn't have control over you and, of course, the opposite is, you know, you're under that line. You're sort of hanging on to it with your hands and, you know, you don't wanna fall off of it but, you know, as you said, it's something that in writing the book, in thinking about this, you know, it's not just writing the book. It had been covering stuffs like this for that a decade.

I just came to think that there are small changes to decisions we make and there are small changes to our behaviors. Most people regardless of their income could get on the right side of the 'Thin Green Line' if they really want it to.

FT: I think that's what I admire most about this book and the messages that, you know, you're not talking about the how the rich can get richer or the rich can get wealthy. It's really how everybody with their given incomes can manage that money properly to feel rich but more importantly to live a life of wealth. You had your aha! moment for this book. You start the book out talking about a group called Tiger 21 and it's a group of exceedingly wealthy individuals who, as you say, they meet monthly to talk about, you know, to give each other counsel but also to gripe [chuckles], you know, complain and try to talk about their problems because apparently even when you're rich you've got problems and you're at this meeting kind of attending as an observer but also a participant. They looked at your personal financial situation and they were very critical, very critical. You yourself or the 1%. Were you surprised that what they were telling you and what was your biggest takeaway from that meeting?

PS: Surprises is an understatement. I was completely desponded and depressed after I walked out of this, you know, very fancy lunch meeting. You know, I went in there. This is sort of my day job as if [inaudible] New York Times. I went and I'm thinking, "You know, these guys are interesting."

They've not only made a lot of money which, you know, many people made a lot of money but they've hold on to that money, and they wanna meet to sort of make sure they continue to make the right decisions, and they offered me the chance to sort of, you know, present our portfolio. Their signature moment when they're not having, you know, a fancy lunch, or listening to speakers, or graping is to really go through each person's portfolio sort of once a month. One person per month and say, "This is good. This is bad. Etcetera."

And so, when I put together what my wife and I had, I mean we're on a 1% earnings but, you know, we're not in the 1% by wealth which is about, you know, 11, 12, \$13 million right now. All of these guys are. You need 10 million bucks to get into Tiger 21 then you pay, you know, 30 grand a month-30 grand a year to meet. Can I just present my portfolio to them? I'll get a good story. You know, I'm sure they'll pick me a part for couple of things that are there but, you know, I'll turn it into column. My readers will get sort of an insight into what it's like to hangout with these guys and we'll move on. Well, it did quite happen in that way.

And essentially, it's described in the book, it felt like a game of Whackamole. They kept going around the table and, you know, it's like one old guy after another who is whacking me for something that I hadn't even thought of. They could have cared less about my portfolio or construction. They could have cared less about my, you know, balance stocks and bonds and commodities. That was totally irrelevant to them and it's irrelevant to, you know, a lot of people. If they weren't whacking me for not having enough life insurance, not having disability insurance, not thinking that, you know, thinking that you too was then in some way you're gonna resemble the present.

I mean one of the things really beat us out for was a condo we had in Naples, Florida and Naples, Florida is a fancy place. Our condo was not all that fancy but, you know, we weren't kidding ourselves. We knew we didn't need this thing. We wanted this thing and it was great and they pointed that if things, you know, went wrong quickly or for a long time, we could be in a lot of trouble. And so I love that day thinking, "You know what? If I can't get these things right," and I think about this stuffs everyday. And, I thought about these stuffs everyday for years and years and years. If I can get these stuffs right, I mean what chances somebody who has a day job in which he or she is not ready about money. What chances for them having it right? And that to me, you know, what really started me thinking about a lot of the things that went into the 'The Green Line'.

FT: It's interesting what they were explaining to you is, you know, making sure that your future does not resemble your current today in terms of your financial journey. I think that so many of us are consumed by earning more but not really what to do with that money once we accumulate it in order to really radically change our lifestyle in a way that is a more meaningful, more satisfying, more fulfilling. That's kind of a missing ingredient in a lot of this education.

PS: Absolutely. And you know, to be clear, my wife and I, in our minds were not living beyond our means in any way. We didn't have any, you know, credit card debt, we're saving, then you know, we only had one child, we're saving for her to go to college, we had set aside a decent amount of money, so it wasn't like real living. At least, we didn't we're living a super lavish life but, you know, we haven't thought of the eventualities.

And you know, for example, we only have a two-year-old at that time. Now, we have a two-year-old and a five-year-old and they were really good at saying, "You know, we've been through this." We've had kids. Our kids are, you know, they're 20s, 30s, 40s. You have no idea what this is going to do to your financial life and, of course, they were right. They are 100% right. We have no idea what else we're gonna do to our financial life.

But you know, I think there is also, you know, one of the things I did take away from that is there is this need for balance. And you know, nowhere in the book do I preach, you know, sort of a semi as life. I mean I'm not gonna tell anybody not to have their Starbuck's latte everyday if that gives them great joy. What I do talk a lot about is that the need to make choices and I think that's what they did for my wife and me. I mean we still spend money on nice things that we need or really want but, you know, a lot of the other things out there. We think, "Hey, you know what? We don't need to do that." You know, we don't need a condo. We can just go and take a vacation, and rent a nice place, and it's you know, less money and less stress.

FT: What I really appreciate about your book is that you--speaking of choices, speaking of spending, you dedicate a whole chapter 2 spending smart and it's called 'Spending Tips from People Who Spend a Lot but Aren't Broke'. [Both chuckle] What do we all need to learn from that chapter?

PS: These guys are all making choices and they're, you know, three of the guys in there are real characters. One made a fortune selling shower doors in Doraville, Kentucky and he made a lot of money but it wasn't a very rewarding life and so he ended up high at the end and then he thought, "What am I gonna do?" And like many upper class folks, he had this idea of buying a big yard which is normally a disaster. It's a complete money pit.

FT: It's a money pit, yeah.

PS: Yeah, total money pit, the wine stinks, nobody wants it, and you know, five years later you plowed everything and then just live on a farm. For him, it worked out that way because he was very savvy about being involved. He didn't just sort of, you know, let other people come in and do everything. He and his wife, they're boxing up orders, they put the labels, they're ordering the corks. It became--it wasn't so much a hobby as a sort of a second career for him and he had this sense of--he was very fortunate to be able to spend his money on this but he wasn't spending such a large amount of it as well that it was gonna, you know, cause him problems.

You know, another guy in this chapter is a football player who was a high draft pick and, you know, football players get picked on all the time. They said the football players and lottery winners are the two worst people to ever give up.

FT: Dissipaters, you call.

PS: Yeah, dissipaters. Yeah, you give them a large sum of money and it's gone. Well, this guy Paul Paslaski. He was lot savvier than that. He came from a really normal family in Pennsylvania, sort of, you know, automechanics school teacher and study economics at Penn State. And, we had these talks about cars because you have this image of football players, you know, all driving, you know, fancy cars, Rolls Royce and Bentleys, what have you.

And, when I first talked to him is during the NFL Lockout a couple of years ago and he didn't even own a car. He was signing autographs at the local Nissan dealership, and they gave him a car for free, and that was good enough for him. It was just he got an SUV and he drove it. Well, they get straight to Jacksonville and everybody wants to sign autographs, so he has to buy a car. So, he agonized over this and this is a guy you'll see in the book. I mean if he never plays another down in football, he is guaranteed \$20 million. \$20 million in his early 20s. If he happens to do well, he could make, you know, 40 to \$45 million. Well, when it comes to buying a car, what he really wants is a BMW, and he wants the biggest BMW there is, you know, 80 to \$90 car and he just can't do it. He can't buy the \$90 BMW.

Now instead of buying, you know, third of that, this giant man does not gonna fit into, he buys an Audi and he buy--instead of buying a \$90 car, he buys a \$65,000 car. Well, that doesn't really seem like, you know, suffering to most people but what is fascinating to me was his thought process. Here is a guy who clearly could buy the giant BMW, if he want it to. I mean he is worth tens of millions of dollars but he'd given that kind of thought on a decision like that and gone with the less expensive. But still a very nice car and that showed me that a guy like that, you know, as a classic dissipater, a guy like is gonna make those little decisions through his life long pass his foot career and chances are, he's gonna remain on the wealthy side of the 'Thin Green Line'. He thinks of these things through.

FT: Sometimes the best gifts is to experience what it's like to be poor, right, so that when you do amass wealth, you actually have the psychology, the right behavioral mindset to think about what you're buying. Sometimes it backfires, of course, when you're a dissipater and you get \$20 million and one wind fall and you could definitely go the other way. We've heard a lot about people losing their fortune, so it's rare to hear that kind of a story.

PS: Yeah, and I'd also say, you know, there are parts of this book are really personal and, you know, poor is a relative term. I would say I grew from where I lived now, I grew up very poor. I probably was, you know, lower middle class or, you know, we were, you know, I remember at one point, you know, when I was in elementary school. It was Carmel Elementary School and we had to go on subsidized lunch and another one week, there is, you know, substitute teacher and she didn't know that if I gave whatever it was, you know, \$5 I was supposed to get me my lunch tickets for the whole week as supposed to, you know, say the other kids pay \$20, and she didn't give me enough tickets.

I remember, you know, that embarrassment of not wanting, you know, any of my classmates and I'm like 10 years older at that time, you know, 10 or 11 years old. I don't want any of my classmates to know anything about that and it caused a lot of problems when I'm going home that day. And you know, I didn't have the right number of lunch tickets. My mom was furious that I didn't speak up but, you know, stuffs like that you don't forget and honestly, I wouldn't wish that on anybody because it's given me great perspective in life. But I guess, I'd like disagree with you in the sense that, you know, growing up poor gave me a lot of perspectives but it also does weird things to you too because [both chuckle], you know, you start to, you know, I'm a fierce...

FT: You wouldn't wish it on anybody but if you can handle it as an adult like you said, you have to take a perspective, that is the gift.

PS: Yeah, I mean I have perspective two ways. One, everything I have, I'm immensely grateful for it because it's more than I ever thought I would have and it's certainly more than I need but, you know, I also--I spent a lot of time writing about wealthy people but I had a lot of empathy for people with less and, you know, when I really drilled down with some of these wealthy people, many of them came from very modest circumstances. And you know, the ones who are the most interesting to me are the ones who retained that perspective and know that, yeah, they were smart. They worked hard but they also got a little lucky along the way.

FT: Yeah, so in this book you talk a lot about their stories and also your story. You just shared with us an anecdote from 'Growing Up,' and I can almost really I remember being in school, and I think awkward for kids who were on subsidized lunch with that it was their tickets were given to them in front of everybody else. And, they were the ones who--some of them sit separately, you know, and they bought lunch, so that it instantly kind of label them as the kids who can't afford to bring lunch from home. And suddenly, you're getting this like perspective on the varying levels of income, your economy, and your neighborhood and it's not a fair way to be, you know, to be labeled.

PS: Yeah, I hope that they've thought it through a little bit better.

FT: Yeah.

PS: Because, you know, I'm 42 but I'm, you know, you get different color of ticket...

FT: Right.

PS: Or, they stamp it in a different way and now look at it. It's like, "Are you kidding me man?" [Chuckles].

FT: Yeah [chuckles].

PS: "It's [inaudible]," [both laugh] you know.

FT: Exactly.

PS: Different color of tickets and that, "Hey, here is the poor kid. Beat him up." I mean, so hopefully, they've got a little wiser about that.

FT: So then, given your history and then also your professional career dedicated to covering wealth matters for the New York Times? What's your personal financial philosophy, Paul?

PS: I mean, I just started to say, my [inaudible] in terms of the 'Thin Green Line' these days but, you know, what I've been throughout my life and it's the sort of, you know, first chapter in this book is a fierce mental accounting. And you know, for people who don't know that is, I mean mental accounting is essentially the idea of bucketing all of your expenses. The money that's coming and money that's going out and if you are a traditional student of economics, you think this is foolish and it's foolish because money tangible, so it doesn't really matter, money goes wherever. But if you're a disciple is behavioral finance as I am, you see this for what it is and you see how it helped people makes sense to the world and also, you know, have a sense of calm.

So you know, for example, you have a bunch of money coming each month as your salary and you can think, "Okay, some goes in the bucket for my rent or my mortgage. Some goes in the bucket for savings. Some goes in the bucket for necessities, like food, gas, you know, I'm gonna take my dog to the vet. Something like that. Some goes in for emergency and, of course, there are some that goes into the bucket for fun." And, I'm a huge advocate of making sure you spend that money in the bucket for fun because there are years in my life when I don't think I did that and I think we can't deprive ourselves.

But that mental, it helps me and, you know, turned my wife onto it and she thought I was totally ridiculous when I first [chuckles], you know, explained it to her but it helped her. She is a small business owner and it helped her think about the expense in her business and if nothing else, at least for me, it gives me a sense of calm like, "Okay, this is in this bucket. That's in that bucket," and you kind of move along, and some months you have some leftover, and that's great. Some months, you know, it's a little tighter but it helps you, you know, have a sense of where the money is going, so that you don't' end the month and say, "Jesus, where did all that money go?" You know where that money went.

FT: It sounds--it is very fundamental, when he was neglect to take these very basic step of just having this connection with our money. I think, you know, for a bag of reasons whether they we're afraid, or we're confused, or we don't have time, or all of the above but the clarity that it can provide is priceless.

You talked already about your lunch tickets growing up and I'd love to transition now to yet another money memory that you had that growing up was pivotal for you. That as an adult now, you reflect on that moment and think, "You know, that's probably where I get some of my emotional baggage or my straight thinking, my good thinking, my bad thinking about money." I mean, we all have various memories of money growing and what was one that was influential?

PS: Yeah, I'm gonna tell another bad story. I'm just kind of, you know, I'm not a bad story guy but, you know, my parents were divorced in 1983 when I was 10, I mean that was an era when people were lousy getting married, and equally lousy at getting divorce, and they would fight over this child support check which, you know, was \$85 per week and to this, you know, I'll never forget that amount. And you know, it supposed to arrive on Friday and instead of arriving on Friday, it would get mailed on Friday, maybe Saturday and it would arrive on Tuesday or Wednesday.

And yeah without fail, there would be an argument every single week about this \$85 and at that time, I thought, "Geez," you know. You know, there is kind of two ways to look at it. At that time, I thought, "You know, why is it my dad just mail it a couple days earlier," then you realized that, you know, when people get divorced, they really don't like each other and they do all kinds of lousy things to one another. So you know, at 42, I can understand that but I now looked at as, you know, "Why is that my mom gets so angry every week," because this was gonna happen. You know, there is something you can't control in life, so as long as it arrives on Tuesday, it will be fine. You can budget it accordingly but it was, I mean obviously, it was a bit of a scarring memory but it got me to think that I never wanted to live in such a way that I was so dependent on, you know, one check. That if one check didn't show up or didn't show up on time, I would be in a lot of trouble.

You know, even when I first started out, I didn't make a ton of money. I always make sure I had, you know, some sort of little reserved and it could have just been, you know, just couple hundred dollars but there's something that was gonna be there. Sorry, I never get to the moment that when I say, "Oh no, you know, I don't want this week. There was a house of cards, you know, the check hasn't arrived. What am I gonna do?"

But you know, after the two sad stories, I wanna tell more positive story now and that was, you know, my grandfather was hugely influential in my life and I say he was the first wealthy person I ever knew. I mean very wealthy but he was retired postal worker. He was a retired postal worker who lived with my grandmother in a ranch house which was about thousand square feet. He had it paid off. He liked to play golf. Played to local minutes per course, you know, once a week, they go out to dinner. You know, he had this pension and somehow, a guy who probably never made more than 20 to \$30,000 a year, you know, at one point, had 4 or \$500,000 saved up.

He was just, you know, he had that sense of enough. He had that sense of, you know, he was able to buy all the things, he and my grandmother wanted but, you know, he didn't--there are lot of things he didn't need and he was just a great influence to me and thinking about that that tradeoff between needs and wants. And, he didn't deprived himself but there are lot of things, he just didn't care about and I tried to, you know, when I'm in the moment of trying to make a big financial decision, I tried to think in the way he did and that was, you know, hugely helpful in a positive way.

FT: What's the decision that you've made in your adult financial life that you're very proud of? What's your So Money moment?

PS: I think we are very good at paying things off and a lot of, not that we don't like it. We understand the need for debt for big purchases like a house but my wife and I are, you know, we get great joy out of paying pounces down to zero. It's gonna send about as nearly as it can be but I remember the day, I was able to pay-off my student loans when I was in my late 20s and it was just to not have, you know, several hundred dollars a month going out to pay my student loans. That was just liberating, and freeing, and it felt wonderful.

And now, when we do things like, you know, pay off a car, when we pay-off a big chunk of our mortgage, when we, you know, make good-sized payment for our daughter's 529 Plan. It's just a sense of relief that something has been taken cared of. Something has been funded and, you know, if something goes really wrong, we won't have to worry about them.

FT: There's a lot of fulfillment that comes with just seeing your money set in a bank account, isn't it?

PS: [Laughs] I feel like [inaudible] now the way you put that one.

FT: No, no, no, but I hear this from my guests who are financially independent, very secure because this comes up a lot. You know, there is this like there's a contradiction. When you make a lot of money or you have enough money, you know, you're still tempted maybe to buy things. Do you think certain things will make you happy? But time and time again, you know, like once you have that money that's sitting in the bank, it's a good feeling and suddenly, all the things that you think you want, but don't seems so imminently necessary.

PS: Yeah, and I, you know, I like nice thing but there comes a time when, you know, I think sometimes my wife and I feel, "Okay. Boy, we bought a few too many nice things in the past six months and we'll do exactly what you said. We're focus a bit more on that number, and the bank account and getting up there and keeping it up there."

And that's, you know, it kind of goes back to what I'm saying at that start about my book is, you know, when you're on the right side of the 'Thin Green Line', you have control over life and life isn't gonna control you. And that's, I think that's why there's, you know, great comfort in a bank balance, or great comfort, you know, paying your life insurance and so, you know, that, "Boy, if I get hit by a bus, you know, that'll stink. I'll miss my family but at least, they won't have to worry." They'll be some money coming in and it'll take care of them and there is something, you know, as you said, you know, very comforting in that.

FT: Would you see this is maybe going out on a limbo but like generally speaking, the difference between rich and wealthy, rich is kind of exciting, and sexy, but it's kind of short-lived and it's very fragile at times. Wealthy is kind of boring but it lasts and it gives you the security that is priceless.

PS: You are a hundred percent correct but as, you know, somebody in the boring camp, I'm not gonna lie to you. No moments where like see that guy in the Maserati, I know this, you know.

FT: Yeah.

PS: [Chuckles] And if I only have, you know, a month of two savings and this is who knows his third wife but like, "Damn! That Maserati looks nice." That's looks a lot better than my SUV where car seat in Cheerios and books and screaming kids, so yeah, but I guess that's, you know, the grass is greener. That rich side is sexy and seductive but look I don't think anybody who ever experienced true stress over money as I have a different points on my life will say they'll take boring over sexy and fun every single day of the week because there is no more, you know, pit in your stomach feeling than, "How am I gonna pay for this or if this doesn't at that time this house of cards type mentality?" And, once you get passed that, you'll take boring every single day of the week and be happy that, you know, there's yogurt and Cheerios in the back seat.

FT: [Chuckles] Amen to yogurt and Cheerios. Let's go through some quick fill-in the blanks. This is the fun part of the show where first that comes to your mind kind of stream of consciousness. Finish the sentence. If I won the lottery tomorrow, the mega lottery, the first thing I would do is...?

PS: I'd buy a boat.

FT: Yeah.

PS: I'd tell that--I wouldn't change a thing about my life. I wouldn't stop my day job. I wouldn't stop writing books. I had lived my life exactly as it is but before, you know, we had this Tiger 21 talk, we had a little boat in Florida, and I'm not saying I'd buy, you know, 100-foot yacht. I'm saying I'd find a little boat that I could tour around, and it's a lot of fun. And, it is a total waste of money but, you know, sometimes things that are fun are total waste of money.

FT: But you know, it will give you experiences and as you know, we've done the study--they studies have been done, experiences can lead to a more fulfilling life.

PS: Absolutely. And that's, you know, when we got rid of the condo for a week, we started taking vacations to different spots, and those experiences with vacations with their kids. That's the fun in life.

FT: Surely. What is one expense that makes your life easier or better?

PS: Boy, I would [chuckles]--the guy who cuts my lawn. He obviously, he cuts my lawn in the summer, and he shovels my snow in the winter, and he doesn't charge me a fortune to do it. And if I was economist, I would say, you know, me paying him is worth more than my time out there, you know, cutting the lawn or shoving the snow. That is an expense that make things definitely better.

FT: How about a splurge? The big thing that you splurge on. We talked about not getting up my lattes, if you don't want to. What's the splurge that you enjoy that might spend too much money but it's makes you happy?

PS: I get suits made. I go to this little shop called the Enderon Shop across in Harvard Square and, you know, once a year, whenever I need a new suit, they fit me, and they make the suit, and they order it, and it's so comfortable. It gives me a lot of confidence so nicely, but it's part two-and-a-half times, just go in Brooks Brothers and buying suit off the rack.

FT: Oh, when you're launching with Tiger 21, there's still off the rack there.

PS: [Chuckles] There's no off the rack. I mean they give you your three bucks of Charnay when you go in to go get a new one.

FT: It's probably have been \$33,000 per annum, yeah.

PS: Yeah, exactly.

FT: One think I wished I had known about money growing up is...

PS: Oh boy, that, you know, I'm gonna be serious here. One thing I should have known about money growing up is that money is just a means of exchange. That's all money is. The more money you have, the money you can buy. The less money you have, the less money you can buy. But, it doesn't mean you're a better person. It doesn't mean you're somehow lacking if you have less of it. It's no judgment on your intelligence if you have more of it.

And unfortunately, I grew in a place at a time with circumstances that money carried so much more weight. Money had all of these psychological connotations, all those baggage to it, and [inaudible] I'm 42, I looked that and money is just a means of exchange. You know, if I can draw that into everybody particularly people who thinks that, you know, the car they drive or the house they have means something more than it's a nice car and it's a nice house. Money is just a means of exchange. That's one thing I definitely wished I knew earlier on.

FT: When I give to charity, I'd like to give to blank because...

PS: I give to organizations that help the blind. I give to one organization that called American Foundation for the Blind that was Helen Keller helped started and they're an educational organization that helps sort of a nexus for all different people, all different organizations in the

blindness field, and I also give to guide dog charity. And the reason for that is, you know, blindness is one of those things where, so the most part is people can't help it. It just happens but with really good resources, the resources are sophisticated. People can live a much better life but this stuffs is expensive like to get the machines, to take the Brahman. These stuffs--these things are really expensive. So, to give a bit of money and help there is wonderful.

And then, you know, given that the guide dog charities, it's the same thing. I mean these dogs did amazing things to help people but, you know, the separate part there is, both my wife is that we have two Labs, so we're dog people, so that does the connection.

FT: I love that. I love that so much. And finally Paul, I'm So Money because...

PS: Because I'm talking to you [chuckles], right.

FT: Well, you're also a columnist for the New York Times, so literally you are So Money but your stories brought to life in your book and so many others so much to learn from. Everyone go out and buy the 'Thin Green Line: The Money Secrets of the Super Wealthy'. Paul Sullivan, thank you so much and good luck with the book.

PS: Thank you so much for having me on. I love it. This is so much fun.

FT: Thank you so much Paul.