



The Six-Week Career Makeover

Week 2: Know Your Value

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There, see? That wasn't so hard. I bet you've had a half dozen great phone calls catching up with your peeps. You probably are already feeling a little more optimistic about the path ahead. I hope so.

However, this second assignment will require a little more foundational prep work—a bit more information to help you focus on yourself to truly get grounded, balanced, and centered so you can think about your aim. In the introduction, I noted that Columbia professor Navla Bahri found that those who successfully navigated an unexpected career disruption did five things, including developing a reflective practice. This is your first assignment on that journey, and I can tell you without hesitation that this is *the most crucial* assignment in this workbook. To be successful, I want to ensure you're in the right space, reflecting on what makes you unique and valuable to a potential employer (or even to potential customers or clients if you decide to go freelance).

Some traditions believe that every individual is born with a unique gift, daemon, or “genius.” Often, we haven't given much thought to what our unique gifts might be.

You have reached the voicemail of Sherryl Dimitry. In order for me to return your call, I need you to answer the two fundamental existential questions: Who are you, and what do you want? <beep.>

I receive very few phone calls these days (thank you, text messaging, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom). Still, the voicemails I do get are pretty entertaining, usually starting with laughs or giggles about answering these ephemeral questions. My adult children are used to the message by now and typically leave replies such as “I am thy progeny; I want a million dollars and your recipe for Aunt Sophie's meatloaf.”

In *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans take the knowledge of design thinking developed at Stanford



University and apply it to your personal life. Design thinking takes a systems view of a “whole” that is “more than the sum of its parts” and looks at the interrelationships, complexity, and evolutionary capacity of open, adaptive systems. They suggest you start by defining your “workview”: “What is work to me? Why do I want to work? What defines ‘good’ or worthwhile work?” Then, define your worldview: “What is my view of life? What values matter most to me? What experiences give my life meaning?” These two views, the authors suggest, help define your “true north.” Throughout the book, they include typical questions we ask ourselves and mindsets we often default to, and suggest ways to “reframe” them. Instead of “What do I want to do? Where should I work? What should I do for a living?” they suggest you reframe to, “I don’t always know where I’m going, but I can always know whether I’m heading in the right direction.”¹ Set the direction—don’t worry about the actual destination or the itinerary.

Workview:

“What is work to me? Why do I want to work?

What defines ‘good’ or worthwhile work?”

Worldview:

“What is my view of life? What values matter most to me?

What experiences give my life meaning?”

I have read several books that speak to “vocation,” and finding your calling or life’s “purpose.” Some of them are very, very good. Others are... well, not so much. I highly recommend that if you read nothing else, you pick up Parker Palmer’s *Let Your Life Speak*. Palmer talks about one’s “daemon” or inner genius. What he writes about is identifying and “naming” that primary essence of yourself, not your



career, not your “calling” as much as *who you are* at the core. He occasionally slips into conflating “essence” with vocation or calling. I’d caution you against trying to define “what I’m supposed to do” because you will default your focus on how that “purpose” should be manifested within your job or even in your career.²

“The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

- Mark Twain

The Icky Guy Myth.

If you are a mid-career or growing-toward-senior level career professional, I am willing to bet you have seen this graphic or one like it³:



Ikigai Ven Diagram

How did this happen? How did building a well-balanced life, as defined in popular books, become distorted to believing that your work or your job must be the way you fulfill your life’s purpose? Better yet, how did searching for your



“purpose” become so tied to your job or how you make money to support yourself and your family?

Simone Stolzoff in *The Good Enough Job: Reclaiming Life from Work* points out that religious traditions used to help us answer the question, “What makes life valuable?” However, no one changed a drive for meaning into a drive for purpose like Richard Bolles did in “What Color is Your Parachute?” Bolles has convinced every generation since 1970 that we should seek to fulfill our purpose in our work. Perhaps Bolles was reflecting what Corporate America was telling its workers: Let your work be your purpose, and let your identity be wrapped around your job.

“Follow your bliss,” and the quote “do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life” have become work mantras. But as Stolzoff wrote: “Expecting a job to deliver transcendence creates a massive opportunity for disappointment.” She also noted that if someone asks, “What do you do?” we translate that question to “Who are you?”⁴ Researchers at Stanford University published research questioning our obsession with “finding your passion.”

*Mantras like “find your passion” carry hidden implications, the researchers say. They imply that once an interest resonates, pursuing it will be easy. However, the research found that when people encounter inevitable challenges, this mindset makes it more likely that they will surrender their newfound interest. And the idea that passions are found fully formed implies that the number of interests a person has is limited. That can cause people to narrow their focus and neglect other areas.*⁵

Derek Thomeson wrote in the Atlantic in 2019—pre-pandemic—that “workism” has become a new religion. According to 2025 data from the Pew Research Center, nearly one-quarter of the world's population has no religious affiliation. “People with no religious affiliation – who are sometimes called 'nones' – were the only category aside from Muslims that grew as a percentage of the world’s population.” According to the research published in June 2025:



- The number of religiously unaffiliated people rose by 270 million, reaching 1.9 billion.
- The share of “nones” climbed nearly a whole percentage point, to 24.2 percent.

Moreover, the research reports that “We found that for every adult in that age group [18-54] who says they joined a religion after having been raised *without* a religion, [more than 3] moved in the other direction – they left religion altogether after having been raised in one. As a result, based on this set of measures, the religiously unaffiliated category has had the largest net gain due to switching.”⁶

We used to get values and meaning from religion. In the absence of religion, we are told what to value and how to find meaning from popular culture and the company's “mission statement” posters hanging in the lunchroom, or flashing on the home screen of our work intranet. In the US, those Religion 2.0 dogmas tell us to worship consumerism and workism.

Thomeson reflected on this trend of shifting our thinking about meaning and work:

*In the past century, the American conception of work has shifted from jobs to careers to callings—from necessity to status to meaning. In an agrarian or early-manufacturing economy, where tens of millions of people perform similar routinized tasks, there are no delusions about the higher purpose of, say, planting corn or screwing bolts: It’s just a job.*⁷

Thomeson continued, “Our desks were never meant to be our altars.” He then reminds us that “To be a workist is to worship a god with firing power.”⁸

Celeste Headlee, author of *Do Nothing: How to Break Away from Overworking, Overdoing, and Underliving*, goes further with her assessment, “We are driven, but we long ago lost sight of what we were driving toward. We judge



our days based on how efficient they are, not how fulfilling.”⁹ Throughout the first part of her book, she outlines the long history of this shift in drive and the rise of valuing efficiency, as well as shunning unproductive time alone and with others. “The Protestant work ethic,” she writes, “viewed idleness as immoral and hard work as virtuous.”¹⁰

*We have been deluded by the forces of economics and religion to believe that the purpose of life is hard work. So every time we feel empty, dissatisfied, or unfulfilled, we work harder and put in more hours. This trend can be traced to Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, Christopher Columbus, and the Age of Discovery. With Luther, laziness became a sin, and with Columbus and the Age of Discovery, the developed world’s eyes turned to new and unfamiliar places, to novelty as an end goal. These obsessions became widespread during the industrial age and they have only strengthened in the more than two centuries since.*¹¹

To Headlee, the danger of the “efficiency cult” is more than just the risks to our physical health, but to our very humanity.

*Our time periods are not named for human development anymore, like the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. We are currently in the jet age, the information age, the nuclear age, and the Digital Revolution. We measure our years in work products, not personal development. Ultimately, the solution is not digital. It is as analog as the human body. Technology can do many things for us—extend our lives, keep us safe, expand our entertainment options—but it cannot make us happy. The key to well-being is shared humanity, even though we are pushing further and further toward separation.*¹²

I found Headlee’s work compelling, especially when reflecting on my own life and career choices. Recently retired, someone asked me, “What do you do?” (Perhaps “Who are you?” is too esoteric and cosmological to ask, as I say in my



voice mail message?). I responded that I'm a writer who has been distracted by a corporate career for 20 years.

Headlee observed: "When time is money, idle hours are a waste of money. This is the philosophical underpinning of all our modern stress: that time is too valuable to waste. We don't pass time, we spend it. It's no wonder that we don't really have pastimes anymore." Writing, at least for me, is neither a pastime nor a profession. It's not even really a 'passion' and certainly not a 'calling.'" I write when I want to share ideas that rattle around my brain. Due to my research background, I tend not to share my ideas or perspectives in isolation, but rather explore detours and diversions to understand how others think as well.

Even those who maintain some belief in a "higher purpose" still buy into the "dream job" myth that work should be satisfying and fulfilling, even if it is not a true "calling" or vocation. Besides "purpose" and "meaning," Stolzoff writes that our social life, our friends, are more and more tied to work, and that employers capitalize on this desire for job satisfaction by pushing for "discretionary effort." He cites the Gallup poll on engagement, asking respondents if they agree with the statement "I have a best friend at work".

I spent years administering, analyzing, and reporting on employee engagement. Employee engagement is closely tied to retention; the cost of replacing employees is often 1.5 times the employee's annual salary. Engagement is often an employer's trophy and also serves as recruiting bait. No recent events underscore this charade more than those who committed themselves to a life of civil service as a U.S. Federal Government Employee. In 2025, those dedicated, purpose-driven, loyal, and engaged Federal employees were given firsthand experience of the firing power of their employer/god. Federal jobs were always secure, with generous benefits and retirement plans. That security kept most federal employees from pursuing higher-paid work in the private sector. That all changed in March of 2025. Living in the greater Washington, DC area, I heard more horror



stories coming from Federal employees than corporate employees for the first time in my life.

Stolzoff points out that the Latin root of “business” or *negotium* means “unpleasant labor.” Until just a few decades ago, throughout history, “wealth” and “success” were defined by NOT working hard, or hardly working at all. Now Americans work more than Europeans and even the Japanese.¹³

Taylorism is alive and well, even though manufacturing and industrial work have all but disappeared. In the Big 4 Consulting firms, performance is tied to billable hours to the client (at least 40 billable hours per week, of course), *plus* the contributions to the firm, and “demonstrated commitment” to your development (training hours) and the firm culture (firm events, social networking, community involvement on behalf of the firm). “Giving back” to the community for these firms is done as unpaid time by employees wearing branded logo polo shirts or t-shirts and pitching how “socially conscious” the firm is. The reward for success? Usually, there is more work. Even Paid Time Off (PTO) and two weekly “shut downs” were pitched to us as opportunities to “recharge” so we could continue to work 50, 60, even 70 or more hours per week.

It didn’t take long for me to get sucked right back into the driven-career-focused mindset. Every supervisor, Project Manager, and “People Manager” I had at the consulting firm pushed me to pursue advancement as the most obvious and logical “next step” in my career. Enticing as a bigger paycheck and higher status were, I managed to come back to reflect on why I was working: Oh yeah, I work to live, not the other way around.

I declined the invitation to submit a business case for promotion over the next three years. I loved taking care of my clients. I detested business development, “selling,” and writing government proposals. Bonuses and promotions were given by calibrating employees against their peers—and at least at my firm, those



calibrations were fair and well considered (as a people manager and engagement leader, I sat through several hours of talent reviews twice per year—responsibility that was above and beyond my billable target, of course). Consulting is a high-demand career. To meet billing targets, expectations for firm contributions, 40 hours of annual required training, and, in the case of promotion candidates, targets for managed revenue and business sales meant working at least 50, and even 60 hours per week or more. According to the Quora.com website, the average McKinsey Consultant works 60-80 hours per week.¹⁴

When my employees told me they wanted to go up for promotion to manager, I showed them the math: Billable hours, plus training hours, plus proposal work and business development hours, plus firm contributions like writing white papers, volunteer hours, work social events: all of which needed to be captured in our timekeeping system and these hours considered as one of the performance variables during talent reviews, easily added up to 45-50 hours per week (more if they planned to use all their allotted PTO). Add another 10 hours if you want to be at the top of your peer group for the top bonus rung. The salary increase of a promotion might seem worth the effort, but it simply defied logic to me to expend 20-30 percent more effort for a possible 7-10 percent bonus at the end of the year. My direct employees understood that the sacrifice of reaching the top bonus rung was one factor considered for promotion, so they knew it would require extra effort on their part until they achieved their goal.

When I'd ask why they wanted a promotion, sometimes they'd look at me confused. Isn't a promotion what they were *supposed* to want? Doesn't everyone seek promotion so they can make more money, have more status, and wield more power and authority? I joined a Big 4 firm after being laid off. I had been the Acting Vice President of Talent for the entire U.S. I took a \$ 50,000 pay cut and became a lowly consulting manager. I was happy to be a minion under the radar of C-suite politics. Focusing on Federal clients also meant my client base would be local in



the DC area, vs all over the country. At least that's what I was told. Within 4 months of joining the firm, I was assigned to manage an HR Strategy project on a military base in southern rural Georgia. Instead of battling the Beltway to get to Maryland, I had a weekly commute of 800 miles each way through Dulles and Atlanta airports for the next 15 months. For the record, it was an easier commute than the beltway.

I was one of the lucky ones during the pandemic. My commute went from 800 miles to about 35 feet down the stairs to my basement office. I was in introvert heaven. I'd take desk breaks to check my garden or do some yoga stretches in my "work pajamas" (business casual top for Zoom meetings, shorts or yoga pants below the waist)

Corporate America, for the most part, is a toxic environment in my hindsight view from the other side of retirement. The entire corporate culture in the U.S. is still based on a time when male businessmen were expected to do whatever it takes to make enough money to be the sole breadwinner and provider for their family. Despite corporate programs offering parental leave for both parents, men tend to resist using that time. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only a third of men used available paid parental leave (although two-thirds claimed to use vacation time for a firstborn child, which was likely far less than the four to eight weeks of parental leave).¹⁵ Corporate America knows their excessive demands are no longer resonating with the majority of employees, so they tell us that their culture will make us love our jobs, and pretend they care about our "work-life balance" with generous leave and vacation policies that go unused because of the perceived career cost to do so. We buy into the idea that we need to be engaged, that our social life should revolve around our coworkers, and that giving every waking moment to our employer will enable us to "live our values" and fulfill our need for meaning and purpose. On the one hand, younger generations, such as millennials and Gen Z, prioritize companies whose values align with their own. On the other hand, they typically seem smart enough to realize that the workplace is not a church



community and is not committed to their fundamental well-being, even when the workplace boasts about all its benefits and Employee Assistance Programs.

Suppose you don't have a clear definition of your value system. In that case, you will find yourself defining success, meaning, and purpose by cultural "norms" and popular media, or your manager's encouragement to climb that career ladder. That's what this assignment is about: Yes, I know you bought this book or are doing the Six-Week Makeover program to advance or refocus your career. I want to make sure you advance or refocus with a clear "north star" guiding your direction, and not just "this is what I'm supposed to want," or "I need to find more satisfying work," or "I still haven't found my 'dream job'."

Stolzoff writes, "Although you may be craving an easy way to develop a healthier relationship with your job, I'm afraid there is no ten-step plan. That's because there is no universal answer to the question of what role work ought to play in our lives. Our relationship to work is not fixed, nor should we want it to be. It's by wrestling with work's place that we uncover what we care about."¹⁶

Stolzoff also rightly points out that trying to set boundaries around work isn't always realistic in a large corporation whose own "health" is dependent on overworked employees. He suggests that trying to set a boundary around corporate demands is akin to "trying to shield yourself from the sun with a cocktail umbrella."¹⁷

Maybe you are early in your career, young, healthy, and haven't yet started a family. This might be your "window" to devote extra energy to your career, you might think. And that is often the case. Just keep in mind that corporate expectations don't change, even when you get to the next phase in your career lifecycle. You may be seeking a few years of "coast" time, but your employer may be wondering why you are not continuing to perform far "above and beyond."

In a 2013 McKinsey study, women were shown to be penalized in the standard performance model: 73 percent of men and 77 percent of women agree that



“anytime, anywhere” availability is a key performance indicator in their company. Eighty percent of respondents stated that having children was compatible with holding a senior executive position for men, whereas only 62 percent of respondents expressed the same sentiment for women.¹⁸

Half of the participants in my doctoral research reported lowering their aspirations and ambitions due to the perceived expectations of more extended hours and increased travel at higher executive levels. Beth had limited her advancement aspirations until recently, before we spoke, noting that only now, with her children grown, would she be willing to relocate and travel more. Gabby described hitting a “sanity ceiling” and wasn’t willing to break through to higher positions if it meant sacrificing work-life balance. Jessica spoke about lowering her aspirations after the difficult birth of her twins, and even Esther, the self-described driven, Type-A personality, suggested she has moderated to an A-minus after her husband battled cancer, making her re-examine her commitment to better work-life balance. Until companies make a concerted effort to change or moderate their performance expectations, more women and men will reach their own “sanity ceiling,” after which their aspirations for advancement will be checked by their rightful commitment to their personal lives.

A recent post-pandemic McKinsey study shows that work-life balance continues to be a struggle, especially for women.¹⁹ I’ve never been a fan of the phrase “work-life balance” because I find it deceptive. I typically refer to “work-life integration” instead. Integration to me reflects that work is an integral part of life, and doesn’t suggest that it is separate from it. Work-life balance to me connotes that “balance” means half of our time is spent on work and half on “life.” There are 168 hours in a week, and I certainly don’t want to dedicate 84 of those hours to working!



So, in the end, it's nearly impossible to decouple your identity from your career entirely. But what you can do is identify the connection as an incomplete linear cause-and-effect formula.

While there is no universal simple solution for keeping work an appropriately balanced part of your life, there are ways to map the systemic variables that reflect the constellation of values surrounding your own “North Star.”

The “Dream Job” Myth

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.

—Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

In the book, *The Great Work of Your Life*, author Stephen Cope talks about several “geniuses,” including Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, and other, more contemporary, famous people and artists like Rosa Parks and Judy Garland.²⁰ I do believe some people are born “to” something. Also, I think most of us are born to “be” something (and in most cases, multiple *things*). Walt Whitman was a Civil War army nurse. Henry David Thoreau worked as a construction worker and farmer to support his writing habit. Thoreau’s mother would routinely bring him food and do his laundry while he was “roughing it” on Walden Pond. Sometimes we have to work to support our calling. Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe had enormously successful careers, and equally famous, tragic personal lives.

I’ll also be completely transparent here: I still have never quite defined “Who I Am” at my core. I’ve tried—even as part of deep personal growth and leadership workshops with some of the top “experts” out there.



I worked for Robert White, founder of Lifespring and ARC Worldwide, for two years when he was bringing his company, then called Extraordinary Living, back to the US from Hong Kong. The 9/11 attacks impacted the economy and his business, and he eventually returned to Hong Kong, where he continued to deliver his signature training events. He finally returned to the US during the pandemic years. After over 30 years of founding and/or leading companies, Robert and his companies have graduated over a million participants from high-impact personal and leadership seminars. In one exercise, participants define “who they are” in one to two sentences. I knew Robert because of my previous work for the Windstar Foundation—an environmental and humanitarian organization founded by singer/songwriter John Denver and Aikido master Tom Crum. At the John Denver memorial sanctuary in Aspen, Colorado, there are life-size stones carved with some of his most famous song lyrics. On the first stone near the sanctuary entrance, is John’s “Who I am” statement from one of Robert’s leadership workshops: I am a Song. I live to be Sung. I Sing with All my Heart.”

I am not as eloquent as John was. I don’t even remember what I eventually came up with the first time I went through the workshop while working for Robert. Something about writing or systems thinking, I think. I was still conflating “doing” and “being” then. John’s co-founder at Windstar, Aikido master Thomas Crum, uses a similar exercise in his “Magic of Conflict” training.²¹ He wanted us to boil our essence down to a single word, if I remember right. I don’t think I could do that either. I think I went with “I communicate” or something like that, but I knew there was no way a single word would encapsulate or define the sense I had of myself. I still can’t find the right words, even in a whole paragraph. I’m not even sure most of us have that “one” thing, because we exist in relationships and contexts that constantly shift throughout life. I am a writer who has been distracted by a long corporate career. I am a change agent. I am a systems thinker with a global worldview. I am a leader and have been a leader-maker throughout my entire career,



developing early-career professionals into managers, managers into executives, and executives into authentic and effective leaders. I am a mom, a grandma, a “bonus adult” to my partner’s teenagers, and a handful of other young adults who have come into my life over the years. I’m a romantic and domestic partner, a gal pal, and a bestie; a gardener, a cook, an adequate photographer, and a bad artist who loves to draw mandalas (poorly).

It’s really, *really* hard to put words to your essence, to give a singular name or even just a brief description of something so complex as *who you are*. But it’s still essential to start. I may find the right words in my 80s. For now, I rely on what others reflect back to me about *who I am* to them, and that’s good enough for me. Others know us better than we know ourselves most of the time, anyway. And I never cease to be surprised by what others see in me.

At the end of these intense experiential events, Robert has participants engage directly with one another and share with the other person the gift they see in them. After days of self-reflection, wrangling with the muck in our brains that gets us stuck in life, this is a highly visceral and powerful experience. But I can’t tell this story nearly as well as Robert, and he has graciously permitted me to share it in full here for you.

With a nod to the late Paul Harvey, here’s the rest of the story from the training we gifted to John Denver’s Windstar Foundation.

Our exercise at the end of the training involves removing all chairs and doing a series of stand-up conversations, one-to-one with each person in that 30-person training. I instruct them to establish eye contact and then complete the sentence, “The gift I see in you is...” (By that time, they know each other quite well.) The receiver can only say, “Thank you”—no denials, editing, distracting, or avoiding. Then they reverse roles. When that’s complete, participants are instructed to “find a new partner and repeat until you’ve delivered and received that message to every participant.”



At the end of the exercise, JD was lying on the floor sobbing. I figured my reputation was ruined—it wouldn't be good when word got out that I caused this horrible result with one of the most loved entertainers in the world.

Not knowing what to do, I lay down on the floor and hugged him. I asked, "What's going on?" What I learned was that not one of his classmates said his "gift" was his music. What he heard was all about his commitment to a sustainable environment, his love for his family, his caring for friends, and his joyful laugh.

He already knew he was a gifted musician and poet. He didn't realize his gifts included being a good man, and he had been living with doubts about that experience of himself. After he regained some composure, he said, "I'm going to write a song about this experience."

I neither believed nor disbelieved him. I thought it might be just something nice to say, motivated in an emotional moment. At John's urging, I joined the board of directors of Windstar, which meant monthly meetings and staying in his guest house during Aspen visits. For the next year, every time I saw him, I'd say, "Where's my song?" This ragging on him is typical of how men stay in a relationship—insults and incompletes! He'd respond, "It's coming, it's coming." Of course, I never expected he'd write the song—I held it as just teasing between friends.

Months later, one of the most special days in my life was when John called with an invitation to his home. I said, accurately and politely, "No, I'm swamped." He pressed me and I kept saying, "Not today." He then said, "I'm leaving on tour tomorrow, and if you don't come now, you will regret it for the rest of your life."

Obviously, I went to his house.



He led me into his kitchen, dragging his guitar behind him like a little kid. He told me I was the first person to hear a new song he had written for me and his baby daughter, Jesse Belle.

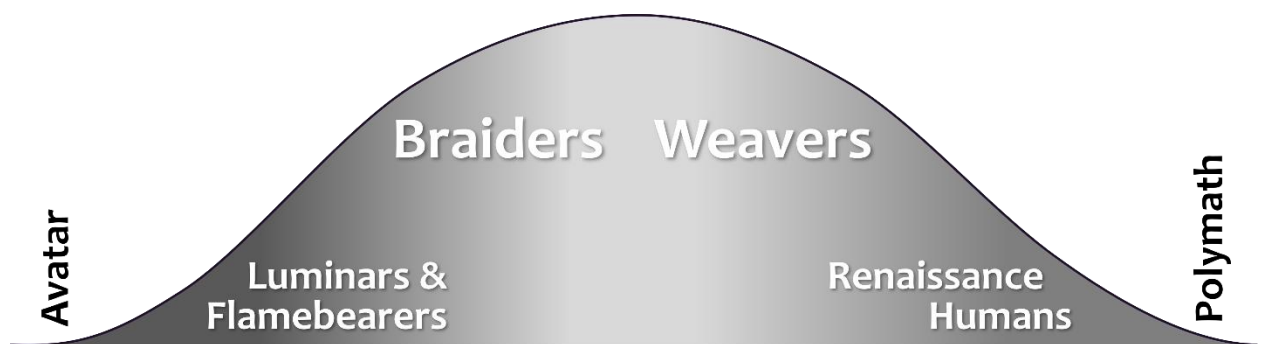
John had kept his promise. He had transformed “The gift I see in you is...” into “The Gift You Are.”

I was the first person to hear this amazing song, and this time I was the one in tears—a very special memory.

John began using “The Gift You Are” as part of his encore set. He asked attendees who were “with someone special” to sing the chorus with him, maintaining eye contact with that “special” person.

The Spectrum of Human Genius

Before we keep searching for that single word or tidy essence statement, let me offer a more compassionate, systems-minded frame for genius and daemon—one that accounts for different life paths without making any of them “less than.” We tend to talk about genius as if it were an anointing, a singular beam of light that hits a chosen few and directs them down one narrow path. That myth is neat; it is also incomplete. In real life, genius shows up across a spectrum.



The Spectrum of Human Genius



Avatars

If you visualize a bell curve, the far left tail begins with the Avatars—those rare individuals whose gift is not just extraordinary but organizing. Their lives aren't guided by preference so much as necessity. They are the gifted vessels—an archetype, a living embodiment of a particular force that seems to speak through them.

Judy Garland opened her mouth, and entire rooms transformed around the sound that emerged. Her daemon demanded a purity of channel that could be both crown and cage—an industry built on her voice, a life narrowed by the very thing that made her extraordinary. When systems monetize a gift without protecting the human who carries it, even the most incandescent talents can flicker under the draft.

Stephen Hawking's version of this singular daemon looked different from Garland's, and yet there is an echo. His work wasn't just "physics" as a job description; it was a way of seeing—reducing bewildering complexity to elegant patterns and holding those patterns up to the light with the steadiness of a watchmaker. That kind of focus can create its own gravity. Health, relationships, and practicalities must orbit the central question. For some, that orbit is liberating, an exquisite concentration that clarifies choices. For others, it can feel like a scarcity of identity: if I stop doing the *one thing*, do I stop being relevant and valued?

Avatar genius burns with clarity. As *Luminars*, their brilliance is focused—a single filament that incinerates doubt. As *Flamebearers*, their heat comes from within, often combusting faster than it can be tended. Their contribution is a cultural shift—making us feel, think, remember, and change.

The human challenges for Avatars can be as unique as their gifts. When your gift is singular and the world loves you for it, dehumanization is the risk. You become your output. The way through is to build buffers and secondary centers of meaning before you think you need them. Protect your recovery as fiercely as you



protect your performance. Create a small circle that loves you when the instrument is quiet. Put language in your agreements and your business models that honors the human: veto power over schedules that break your body, creative control clauses that keep your voice yours, seasons of deliberate rest that are not framed as failure. If you are not famous but still feel the narrowing—one gift that commands all your attention—draw boundaries around it that keep the person larger than the product.

Renaissance Humans

The far right tail of the curve tells a different story. Here we find the Renaissance humans. Not dabblers, not generalists, these are the *multidimensionals*—those who have attained depth in multiple arenas and weave their fluency into novel forms of creativity and insight. Their daemon refuses to specialize. They are generative. They challenge categories. Leonardo da Vinci did not toggle between artist and scientist; he transcended both. Hedy Lamarr, icon on the screen, was simultaneously architecting the technological scaffolding of modern wireless communication. Lamarr was sold to us in a single frame—actress, beauty, celebrity—while another truth lived beside it: an inventor who intuited patterns of frequency and timing that would become the backbone of technologies she never lived to see fully honored in her name. The polymath's genius is synthetic. It hides in the overlaps, in the willingness to let seemingly disparate interests converse until a new voice emerges between them.

But the world doesn't always reward the right stories. Markets prefer clarity over complexity; institutions prefer boxes with clean labels. Lamarr's inventions were eclipsed by Hollywood, not because the science was less profound, but because the public could more easily digest one narrative about her. If your daemon spans fields, you may have to do more work to steward your own multi-chapter story. You will need to prune. You will need to choose which strands to cultivate deeply now and which to let lie fallow until they can be woven in with integrity.



Without that discipline, even a Renaissance mind becomes a Renaissance mess—everything begun, little completed, value trapped in endless possibility.

In rare cases, a true polymath emerges. These are Renaissance humans times ten—able not only to achieve depth in many fields but to innovate within them, like da Vinci and Lamarr. They don't just synthesize—they originate. Most systems won't support polymaths well; they require autonomy, creative freedom, and an ecosystem built around their mode of operating. But they're not the model. They're the exception.

Braiders and Weavers

Which brings me to the middle, where most of us live—and where real magic happens. This central stretch of the curve is the domain of the **Braids** and **Weavers**. Unlike Avatars, our gifts don't combust in singular flame. Unlike Renaissance minds, we don't stack discipline after discipline into cross-field expertise. We carry one or two strong strands—deep enough to be respected, seen, and sought—and we combine them with a surrounding constellation of capacities that create value through connection. Braids build coherence through structured fluency—like those who lead systems change by integrating product, policy, and people. Weavers bend fluidly across domains—they shape culture, broker partnerships, scale insights.

The middle comes with its own quiet frictions. Hiring managers, pressed for speed, may look at your breadth and say, “You're good at too many things,” which often translates to, “I don't know the job title that fits you.” Colleagues may misread your curiosity as a distraction. You may feel the tug-of-war between being “the best” at one thing and being invaluable precisely because you're not trapped inside a single box. The way through isn't to amputate parts of yourself to fit a template. It's to own your pattern and narrate it clearly. There is a profound difference between scattered and strategic.



The strategy here is to “show the math” of your impact. Keep a living ledger of before-and-after snapshots: the time you redesigned a workflow and cycle time dropped by 30 percent; the program you stabilized that stopped bleeding money; the team you coached where attrition fell and throughput rose. Tell the story in language the system understands, not as apology for being a generalist, but as proof that orchestration is a performance in its own right.

The work here is often invisible. In rooms addicted to linear roles and line-item accountability, Braids and Weavers get called “scattered,” “nice-to-haves,” or “hard to place.” A Weaver’s value must be translated, and their narrative must connect the strands. “I synthesize human dynamics and strategic planning so that complexity becomes executable.” A Braid must reveal the shape of the whole. “I combine coaching, data fluency, and stakeholder stewardship to lead post-merger integration with trust intact.”

The trap in the middle is dilution—or being cast as “utility player” when the real contribution is orchestration. The way out is to claim your pattern with rigor and grace. Don’t apologize for breadth. Name the ecosystem it allows you to lead.

Every point on this curve has gifts. Every point has risks. Avatars electrify but burn. Renaissance minds dazzle but diffuse. Braids and Weavers connect but go unseen. What makes any position viable is the alignment between your nature and your environment—and your ability to narrate, negotiate, and sustain that alignment. If your context doesn’t fit, redesign it. Shift the role. Build a platform. Gather allies. Your daemon deserves room to breathe.

Agile Shapeshifting Does Not Diminish Your Genius

Across the curve, a common source of suffering is the mismatch between your pattern and your environment. That is a design problem, not a failure of character. If the role squeezes your gift into contortions, renegotiate the role to fit the contours of your daemon. If the team cannot use you as you are, consider whether there is a



better team for this season, or opt to shift left or right to best contribute where you are. If the system is not ready to see what you can do, build a side platform where your essence can breathe while the market catches up—a pro bono project, a lab, a collaborative with others who work like you. You don't need to burn down your life to honor your daemon; you can tune the mix.

A practical way to navigate your “default” or natural place on the bell curve to better align with the systems you inhabit is to name your season. Over the next year or two, where will you lean? If you have lived in the middle, you might choose a deepening season: apprentice yourself again to one element of your craft until your spike sharpens. If you have been left-tail for a decade, you might choose a widening season, not to dilute your gift but to give it better companions—communication, mentoring, or business acumen that amplifies impact without hijacking identity. If your right-tail synthesis has scattered you, you might strip back to the two strands that best serve the problems you care about now, then rebuild the braid deliberately. Seasons are not betrayals; they are acts of stewardship.

And because humans tend to undervalue what they can't name, language is leverage. Write a paragraph that tells the truth about your pattern, in words that help other people make decisions about you. Connect what you do to the problems you reliably solve and the outcomes that matter in your arena. Then pressure-test that story with people who have seen you in action. Ask them where you are overselling, where you are hiding, and which problems they would hire you to solve again. Their reflections will help you calibrate both honesty and aspiration. The story we tell about our daemon isn't marketing fluff; it is a map others use to find us when we could be most useful.

Underneath all of this is a gentler measure of success than the myths we inherited. You are doing it right when your gifts are used regularly in service of things you care about, in ways that sustain your health and relationships. Some days, that looks like Hawking, bending the cosmos into an equation that will outlive



us all. Most days, it seems quieter: preparing well, listening closely, telling the truth, teaching what you know, doing the work in front of you with steadiness and love. The bell curve is a landscape, not a ranking system. You can shift your place on it—and design your life to match so the noise turns down. Most of us won't reshape a field or carry a singular flame. Most days, we show up, deepen a conversation, fix a process, plant a seed. When you do that, you stop “performing” worthiness and start to embody it.

With the framework of the spectrum of genius in mind, I'll be honest: I've never landed neatly on a single word or phrase for my essence or genius either—and I don't think I need to. What matters is that I know my patterns. When I was in corporate roles, I'd find ways to instill my pattern of value, and I could also flex and adapt as needed for the environment. Now I can design my work and days around my more natural flows.

Do-be-do-be-do

I know that *what we do*, especially our chosen profession, is a large part of our identity. It's hard not to conflate our “being” with our “doing.” Even John Denver conflated his career and profession with his essence.

Let me wax philosophical (and awkwardly academic) for just a moment.

I was very fortunate during my graduate and doctoral research to have studied and been mentored by Bela H. Banathy, one of the early board members of the International Society for the Systems Sciences and the founder of the International Systems Institute (where I was a research fellow for over 10 years). At one point during my doctoral program, one of my professors commented on an essay I had submitted, saying something like, “This sounds like Pragmatism. I want you to write about William James and other pragmatists next time.” This is how I responded in that essay.

In my view, the biggest failing of the modern-industrial-scientific era is that it taught us to value answers, then deceived us into believing that one



answer was sufficient—or worse—that only one answer exists. Quite innocently, we have learned to quit asking when the first conclusion emerges. We mistake truths for Truth and forget that we may have missed other possibilities. Instead of thinking we have to settle for a cramped, compact, fuel-efficient car, if we value our natural resources, we could instead ask whether it's possible to design energy efficient SUVs. [Note: I wrote this in the late 1990s before hybrid SUVs and electric vehicles were even a thing.]

The purpose of life—however it has been determined implicitly and explicitly by individuals and cultures throughout the ages—has always been the undercurrent that has guided choices, values, and behavior.²² It also seems that belief in a transcendent divine, or the lack thereof, shapes answers, especially in the contemporary era, still prevalently dominated by rationalism, science, and the mechanistic thinking of the industrial age. Both positivism and relativism have provided incomplete and unsatisfying answers to the question of Divinity: The universe is a giant mechanism and (a) God runs the machine so we have no choice but to be the cog we were created to be, or (b) there is no God, so the machine has no ultimate purpose.

The predominant “isms” embedded in our modern cultures—mechanism, relativism, positivism, and postmodernism, as paradigms driving lines of inquiry, have ultimately answered for their own ism the core question of the purpose (or lack of purpose) of life, and secondarily, how are we to live it. Haven't we always relied on the isms we've learned to guide us through our lives, and haven't those isms determined the paths we choose for the different contexts of our lives?

“Brain power is our specialty,” wrote Peter Singer (1995), a postmodern ethicist reflecting on our species' evolutionary advantage, “But the ability to reason is a peculiar ability. Unlike strong arms, sharp teeth or flashing legs, it can take us to conclusions that we had no desire to reach.”²³



OK, I admit, debating esoteric cosmology and existential philosophy may not have been my strongest academic forte. However, I believe it's essential to consider our foundational beliefs about ourselves, our place in the world, and how we interact with others who may hold different worldviews.

If you have a spiritual practice or personal faith belief, you may already feel a sense of meaning, purpose, and definition in your life. You may be thinking, 'I know who I am as a follower of Jesus, Abraham, Mohammed, Buddha, Krishna, Joel Osteen, Taylor Swift.' I would encourage you not only to embrace it, because it gives your life meaning and direction, but also to question it. We may all be children of God, but God makes us all unique and different for a reason—what is *your* uniqueness? Make sure you are truly defining your own essence, sense of purpose, and meaning, and not some universal purpose or definition that applies to everyone who shares your faith perspective.

Grand-mère

I'm sorry—I have one more story for you to consider before you start your second assignment.

Grand-mère was not even my own grandmother, but the French-born grandmother of a friend and co-worker. I want to tell you about grand-mère because she is the ideal example of someone who never defined *who I am* in clear, articulate words for the world to hear or read. She wasn't famous. She didn't have a singular vocation or "purpose" in her life that was recognized like a renowned artist, poet, or celebrity. She was simply grand-mère, a white woman who fell in love with a black American soldier in France in WWII and emigrated to the US during the Jim Crow era, settling in Chicago but traveling to Mississippi to spend time with her husband's family when it was illegal for her to be married to a Black man. Grand-



mère lived life on her terms. She lived it completely authentically. She didn't change the world, but she undoubtedly experienced it fully and deeply.

I've been listening to (and asking for) stories about grand-mère from my friend Dan for over 15 years, and she has become one of my favorite and most steadfast muses.

"Did I tell you about the time she got shot in the leg diving into a foxhole?" That was a great story. Another time, he told me how his grand-mère met his grandfather. "Black soldiers weren't allowed to fight alongside white soldiers. After Genevieve (yes, she did have a name before grand-mère) was forced to hide in the basement during a Nazi raid in France, Rufus was part of a truck convoy bringing in supplies and normalizing allied security protocols. That's when grand-mère and he met. He told her she was beautiful and was charming even with the language differences."

While most authors tell stories of grand lives and heroic accomplishments when talking about seeking and finding your path in life, I think of grand-mère.

"I survived the Nazis. I survived Jim Crow. I survived cancer. Now I've survived COVID-19," she told Dan about a year before she passed away at 100-and-a-half years old. I never had the opportunity to meet her in person. Grand-mère will always be an inspiration, reminding me that fame and fortune are not what define a well-lived, authentic expression of one's gift or genius.

OK. Deep breath. Now you are prepared to tackle Assignment 2: Know Your Value.

This assignment has two parts. Both parts are absolutely required. Copy this page or pull the assignment from the workbook, because there's no more reading for you until you are done with these two assignments. I'll see you back here in a week or two.



Know your Values. Then, Know your Value

Assignment 2a: Who I Am and How it Drives How I Am at Work

Beyond your field or discipline (acquired competency), spend some time thinking about what makes *how you do what you do* unique and valuable. Think about a time when you felt like you were adding value to your team/company at work. Think about a time when you felt in “flow” at work, or enjoyed what you were doing. Writing down your reflections has been proven to have a more substantial impact on learning compared to typing out notes or recording a lecture. If you hate to write, share your reflections verbally with a person or people from your posse who have agreed to support your career transition. The key assignment here is to put words to your thoughts. So, just thinking about these questions is not enough. I want you to clarify and name those thoughts, making them concrete and tangible by using specific words and language. Contact your identified career coach (or coaches) from your posse to discuss and refine your language further.

What are you good at? Describe a significant accomplishment at work that made a difference. Think about patterns or “themes” of activities you find yourself doing, even if they aren’t related to your primary job. Try to uncover or discover your core “gift.” What makes your contribution and value unique to you?

Assignment 2b: The Gift You Are

The people closest to us see us differently from how we even see ourselves. Choose 4–5 people (former managers, coworkers, mentors, or friends, and of course, the Cheerleader in your posse) who have worked with you in different capacities—this gives a well-rounded view. Ask them what they see as your most significant value, or ask them to tell you about an experience they had with you that they valued. Reach out by phone, ideally (I know, who does that anymore?). Current research is illuminating the significantly more impactful communication that occurs with your voice, which is lost in writing. Of course, it’s perfectly ok to use text or email to schedule a time to talk by phone. If you need a script, adapt something like this so it feels natural to you: “I’m working on refining how I



describe my strengths for my career growth. Since we've worked together closely (or, since you know me well), I'd love your perspective: What do you think I bring to a team or project that's uniquely valuable?" Write down what you heard. This doesn't need to be work-related. Analyze common themes. If multiple people mention strong problem-solving, collaboration, or strategic thinking, those are core strengths you can use in later assignments and emphasize in résumés and interviews. Hearing how others perceive your value will give you insight into your unique value, your core "genius."

You've accomplished a lot in the past few weeks—connecting with your posse, reflecting on your career's role in your life, and gaining new insight into your unique strengths. By now, you should feel more grounded and focused than when you started. But identifying your value is only the first step of 'Get Ready.' Next, we'll move into 'Take Aim,' where you'll explore how your career fits into your broader life system. By pinpointing key leverage points for improvement, you'll gain a clear vision for shaping your career—and other potential income streams—to support the life you want to build.



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