


The POWER of
MEANING

Crafting a Life That Matters

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remorse by telling him that he played an indispensable role in the Buddha's life. Cunda, after all, gave the Buddha his final meal: "There are two offerings of food," the Buddha explained to his attendant, "which are of equal fruition, of equal outcome, exceeding in grandeur the fruition and result of any other offerings of food. Which two? The one partaken of by the Buddha before becoming fully enlightened in unsurpassed, supreme Enlightenment; and the one partaken of by the Buddha before passing into the state of Nirvana in which no element of clinging remains." In other words, the meal Cunda had prepared was one of the most important ones the Buddha ever ate.

The Buddha didn't have to extend his compassion to Cunda in those final moments of his life. He was deathly ill and in a great deal of pain. Instead of worrying about the blacksmith who had inadvertently poisoned him, the Buddha could have devoted his precious time to preparing for death or meditating or contemplating the legacy of Buddhism. But he didn't. Instead, he turned his attention to Cunda and assured him that the bond the two of them formed was meaningful.

The Buddha's story contains a lesson for all of us. The search for meaning is not a solitary philosophical quest, as it's often depicted, and as I thought it was in college—and meaning is not something that we create within ourselves and for ourselves. Rather, meaning largely lies in others. Only through focusing on others do we build the pillar of belonging for both ourselves and for them. If we want to find meaning in our own lives, we have to begin by reaching out.



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Purpose

ASHLEY RICHMOND SPENDS THE MAJORITY OF HER time at work cleaning poop out of stalls. Her hours are rough, and she rarely gets holidays off. She earns significantly less money than most college graduates her age. And her body often aches at the end of the day. And yet, she says, this is her dream job: "I can't imagine doing anything else."

Ashley is a zookeeper at the Detroit Zoo, where she cares for giraffes, kangaroos, and wallabies. It's a role she knew she wanted to play from a young age. One of her earliest memories is of driving through a safari park in Canada when she was three years old. As her family's station wagon motored along through the park, a giraffe approached the vehicle and suddenly struck its large head into the open window. "Everyone—all of my sisters—were screaming, but I was laughing and trying to stick my hand in his mouth," she said. "I've had a strong draw to animals since the beginning." When Ashley was six, a neighbor hatched a pet chick for a class project. Ashley was riveted. She wanted to grow up, she remembers thinking, so she could take biology and have the opportunity to care for an egg—to be "the reason why it hatched." Just a

few years later, she took charge of caring for and training her family's pet dogs.

When Ashley was nine, a relative who had noticed her affinity for animals told her that she should consider becoming a zookeeper as an adult. It was the first time Ashley had heard of zookeeping as a career, but after she learned more about it, she knew that it was what she was meant to do. In the sixth grade, when she was assigned to write an essay on how she would like her life to unfold in five, ten, and fifteen years, Ashley wrote that she wanted to enroll at Michigan State University, get her degree in zoology, and work at the Detroit Zoo.

She graduated from Michigan State with a degree in zoology in 2006 and has been working at the Detroit Zoo ever since.

When I first met Ashley at the Giraffe Encounter, a feeding platform overlooking the giraffe habitat at the Detroit Zoo, her hands were covered in dirt, and she was carrying a bundle of branches in one arm. "Sorry I'm a mess," she said. She threw the branches on the ground, picked one up, and held it straight up in the air.

"Grab one from the pile," she said, "and hold on to it tightly with both hands."

A giraffe named Jabari galloped toward us. His geometric spots were chestnut brown, and they radiated in the October sun.

"Jabari is friendly. But," Ashley said as I lifted my hand toward his muzzle, "he doesn't like to be petted." On the other end of the habitat stood Jabari's mate Kivuli and their son Mpenzi, a one-year-old calf named after the Swahili word for "love." Jabari sniffed my stalk of leaves and snorted. Then he galloped away.

Ashley rustled her branch and called out Jabari's name to

coax him back. He returned and examined my branch again. He bit into the leaves at the top of the branch, nearly pulling the stalk out of my hand. In a matter of seconds, he had stripped it clean of leaves. I put the branch down and turned my attention to my notebook. Jabari bent his neck over the wooden fence of the feeding platform and dragged his nose along the edge of the page I was writing on. He lifted his head and looked directly at me, his long and muscular neck curved like a wave. The tip of his nose was an inch away from my face.

"He's such a curious guy," Ashley said.

This feeding exercise is an example of what's known in the zoo community as "enrichment." In a zoo environment, life is easy for wild animals like giraffes. They are fed regularly, protected from disease, and do not encounter predators. Though the animals lead longer lives as a result, those lives may not be as interesting as they would be in the wild. Ashley's role at the zoo, she told me, is to do everything in her power to make the lives of animals she oversees—none of whom chose to be in captivity, she pointed out—richer, happier, and more exciting. "I can't re-create the wild for them," she said, "but I can try to help them live somewhat normal lives."

Enrichment is one way for zookeepers and staff to try to achieve that goal. By moving rocks or tree branches around to create a different environment for the animals to explore, hiding food so that the animals have to search for it, or giving the animals objects to manipulate, they help make life in the zoo more unpredictable and, therefore, more stimulating. Enrichment also helps animals feel a sense of control over their environment, which is critical to their well-being. Jabari chose to participate in the feeding activity, for example, while Kivuli and Mpenzi chose not to.

“We try to give them opportunities to behave in natural ways,” Ashley said. “Giraffes spend most of their time eating, so I try to find ways to feed them that are new and challenging for them.” It’s a challenge for Ashley, too: she has to constantly think of new methods to spice up their environment so that the animals do not get bored.

The keepers know their animals are doing well when they see them act naturally. Toward the end of our discussion, for example, one-year-old Mpenzi rammed the side of his body into Jabari, who rammed the young giraffe right back. Mpenzi’s neck swayed to the left with the force of his father’s hit. Then the two of them slapped their necks together. When I asked Ashley what they were doing, she said, “They’re necking. Jabari is showing his son how to be a boy. This is what they’d be doing in the wild.”

Ashley joined the Detroit Zoo at a watershed moment. Over the last four decades, zoos have undergone a major shift in purpose. It used to be that the primary mission of zoos was entertaining the public, and the animals were a means to that end. As late as the 1980s, the Detroit Zoo had an enormously popular chimpanzee show featuring the primates dressed up in clownish outfits doing silly stunts like riding tricycles and drinking from teacups. Today, top zoos like the one in Detroit define their purpose as ensuring animal welfare and contributing to the conservation of species and natural habitats around the world. A chimp show—or anything like it—would be considered an unacceptable violation of the animals’ dignity and a distortion of nature.

That mission—to put the animals first—is always at the forefront of Ashley’s mind. And she isn’t alone. According to social scientists Stuart Bunderson and Jeffery Thompson,

zookeepers have an unusually strong sense of purpose. They often describe their work as a calling—as something they were destined to do from a very young age because of a preternatural ability to connect with, understand, and care for animals. Zookeepers, the researchers found, are willing to sacrifice pay, time, comfort, and status because they believe they have a duty to use their gifts to help vulnerable creatures in captivity lead better lives. And they derive an enormous sense of meaning from living out that purpose.

Ashley shares this mindset. She spends only 20 percent of her time doing fun or intellectually challenging work, like training the animals or providing them with enrichment. The other 80 percent of her time is devoted to far less glamorous tasks, like cleaning the habitats. But even menial tasks are meaningful for Ashley, because they are tied to her broader purpose. “Keeping the yards and stalls clean is important,” Ashley said, “because that helps the animals. It keeps them healthy. My goal every day is to make sure they are enjoying their environment—and a big part of that is giving them a clean place to live.”

PURPOSE SOUNDS BIG—ending world hunger big or eliminating nuclear weapons big. But it doesn’t have to be. You can also find purpose in being a good parent to your children, creating a more cheerful environment at your office, or making a giraffe’s life more pleasant.

According to William Damon, a developmental psychologist at Stanford, purpose has two important dimensions. First, purpose is a “stable and far-reaching” goal. Most of our goals are mundane and immediate, like getting to work on time,

going to the gym, or doing the dishes. Purpose, by contrast, is a goal toward which we are always working. It is the forward-pointing arrow that motivates our behavior and serves as the organizing principle of our lives.

Second, purpose involves a contribution to the world. It is, Damon writes with his colleagues, “a part of one’s personal search for meaning, but it also has an external component, the desire to make a difference in the world, to contribute to matters larger than the self.” That could mean advancing human rights or working to close the achievement gap in education, but it works on a smaller level, too. Teens who help their families with tasks like cleaning, cooking, and caring for siblings, for example, also feel a greater sense of purpose.

People who have such a purpose believe that their lives are more meaningful and more satisfying. They are more resilient and motivated, and they have the drive to muddle through the good and the bad of life in order to accomplish their goals. People who fail to find purpose in their daily activities, however, tend to drift through life aimlessly. When Damon looked closely at emerging adults 12 to 22 years old in a major study he conducted with his colleagues between 2003 and 2007, he found that only 20 percent of them had a fully developed, purposeful social purpose that they were actively working toward. Purposeful youth are more motivated at school, get better grades, and are less likely to engage in risky behaviors like drug use. But 8 out of 10 of the young people Damon studied did not yet have a clear sense of where their lives were going. Many of them had made some progress toward setting long-term goals, but they did not know how they would pursue those goals or whether their aspirations were personally meaningful to them. A quarter of the emerging adults were “disengaged, expressing virtually no purpose.”

Twenty years ago, Coss Marte was one of those purposeless children. Coss grew up on New York’s Lower East Side in the 1980s and 1990s with his parents and three siblings—two older sisters and a younger brother. As a kid, he was mischievous and got into trouble. He attended four different high schools, having been kicked out of three for offenses like smoking and fighting. Even so, he graduated at the top of his class. “I did well in school without trying,” he said. He was smart, ambitious, and—when he wanted to be—a hard worker.

Coss’s father, a Dominican immigrant, ran a bodega, and Coss worked there as a cashier, cleaner, and stocker. He also collected cans and bottles to exchange for cash. Coss hated that he was poor and wanted desperately to change that fact. “I was always on the hustle,” he said. “I saw the other kids have better stuff than me and I wanted that stuff. I was hungry to make money.”

With his drive and smarts, he could have gone to college like his siblings, who ended up working at companies like Goldman Sachs and IBM. Instead, he started selling drugs.

In the eighties and nineties, the crime rate in New York was spiking, and the Lower East Side was one of the epicenters of the drug trade. Coss recalls that people would line up on street corners waiting to buy drugs. A dealer in the apartments above would lower a bucket on a rope filled with drugs to the buyer below, who would fill the bucket with money before the dealer would pull the bucket back up.

Coss soon joined their ranks. He had started smoking weed when he was eleven years old. By the time he was thirteen, he was selling it. A few years later, he began selling crack and powder cocaine, too. At sixteen, he inherited the lucrative street corner at Eldridge and Broome from a respected drug dealer and began managing the other dealers who came with the corner.

Coss was a natural entrepreneur—a savvy businessman—and he saw that the Lower East Side was gentrifying. By 2000, young professionals in law and finance were flocking into his neighborhood, and Coss realized that if he expanded his market to them, his business would soar. He printed ten thousand business cards that listed his phone number underneath the words “Festival Party Services: No Event Too Large or Too Small 24/7.” Then he put on a nice suit and tie and headed to Happy Ending, a trendy new bar in the area, to hand them out to the yuppies. He created, as he put it, a “private, bougie delivery service” for cocaine and marijuana. Clients placed orders over the phone, and Coss’s workers delivered the drugs to them in luxury cars.

At nineteen years old, Coss was making \$2 million a year. He had nice clothes, wore expensive shoes, drove a fancy car, and split his time between multiple apartments in New York. A decade after he had decided not to be another poor kid from the hood, he was living his dream. But living your dream, as Coss would soon find out, is not necessarily the same thing as finding your purpose.

The dream ended one evening in April of 2009. Coss, then twenty-three, was trying to reach his workers, but no one was picking up their phones. “So I’m wondering what the hell is going on,” Coss said. “I stepped out of my house with a package to deliver myself.” The feds were outside his door, ready to raid the apartment. Coss tried to run, but the agents caught him and searched the apartment, where they found over two pounds of cocaine and \$5,000 in cash. He and eight other members of his operation were arrested in one of that year’s biggest drug busts in New York.

Coss was sentenced to seven years in prison. He wasn’t too worried. He had been in and out of correctional institutions

since he was thirteen and figured this would be “just another road trip.” But when he got upstate to the penitentiary, the doctors there gave him some unsettling news: he would probably die before he was released. He had high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and would likely have a heart attack if he did not start eating more healthily. Coss, who was five foot eight, weighed 230 pounds.

The prognosis was a wake-up call. Coss had never exercised. Even in New York, he used to drive to the corner store twenty feet away and double-park. “I just paid the tickets,” he said. “I was super arrogant.” In prison, Coss started working out and eating better. At first, the other inmates laughed at him—he couldn’t even do one pull-up. But he pressed on. He began by doing cardio for ten to fifteen minutes each day. Within a few months, he was working out for two hours straight. He ultimately lost 70 pounds.

With his healthier lifestyle came a new insight: he wanted a different life from the one he had been living. But wanting and doing are not the same thing. In prison, Coss continued to deal drugs and sold moonshine made from fermented fruit.

When he wasn’t working the black market, he took on the role of the prison’s personal trainer, teaching inmates exercises they could do in their cells. “Helping other people,” Coss said, “it was empowering: just to have people come up to you and ask you for knowledge of how to do something and to share my knowledge of how to do it.” He helped over twenty inmates climb out of obesity. One man, whose 320-pound girth inspired the nickname “Big Papi,” lost over 80 pounds with Coss. “He actually cried,” Coss said, “saying, ‘Thank you, I have never been this fit. I was one of the fat boys.’”

These experiences were fulfilling, but Coss had to hit rock bottom before he recognized his true purpose in life. Just before

his release date, Coss landed in solitary confinement for thirty days after an altercation with an officer. In solitary, he was given only a pen, paper, an envelope, and a Bible. He used the pen and paper to write a ten-page letter to his family explaining that he wasn't going to be coming home as planned and telling them that he had "really fucked up this time." When he finished the letter, though, he realized that he couldn't send it. He didn't have a stamp.

As the days wore on, Coss obsessed over how to get the letter to his family. Then he received a letter from his sister, a devout Catholic. In the letter, she suggested that Coss read Psalm 91, a beautiful poem about God watching over his flock during danger and turmoil. "I didn't believe in God or religion," Coss said, "and I said, 'Hell no, I'm not reading that. That's a waste of time.'" But then he reconsidered. "I realized all I had was time," he said, "so I decided to pick up the Bible." He flipped to Psalm 91. "When I opened to that page, a stamp fell out of the Bible. I got goose bumps. It was a supernatural moment for me."

That moment changed Coss's life. "I read the Bible from front to back," he said, "and understood I was fucking up. I was not doing anything to help society. Before, I didn't think selling drugs was a problem. I thought it was another job. All I thought about was getting paid. But I realized that I was affecting my family and these people I was selling drugs to. I thought, 'I fucked up so many lives and I don't know how to pay it back.'"

But then he realized that he *was* beginning to pay it back—by encouraging other people to get in shape and lead better lives. Helping other people improve themselves through fitness, he decided, was the unique contribution he could make to society. That thought motivated him. He wrote out a busi-

ness plan for a fitness center. "I used the side of the Bible as a ruler and made a spreadsheet," he said. "I used the nutritional info from the milk carton they gave me to devise a nutritional plan for people." When he came out of solitary confinement, he made a vow to himself to never sell drugs again. He served an additional year in prison and then went home in March 2013.

Back in New York, he had nothing. He had run out of money in jail, and the government had seized most of his assets. He slept on his mom's couch as he rebuilt his life. "I went to a whole bunch of nonprofits to help me out, and I would never have gone to any before," he said. "But I was super humble and started asking for help." He got a day job at Goodwill doing clerical work and in his spare time thought about how to launch his business.

One of the nonprofits he encountered was Defy Ventures, whose mission is to help entrepreneurs from the street turn into legal entrepreneurs—to "transform the hustle." They offered a business education program, which Coss completed. They also hosted a business competition. Just two months after he was released, Coss won first place in that competition for the business plan he initiated in solitary confinement.

With his award money, he opened Coss Athletics in 2014, a fitness studio on the Lower East Side that specializes in a prison-style workout. The workout he created relies exclusively on body weight and is designed for small spaces, like a prison cell—or an urban apartment. When I first spoke with Coss in 2014, he had 350 clients and was working full-time at Goodwill to support himself. When I followed up one month later, he had doubled his client list and was hoping to raise money from private investors. By 2016, he had attracted over 5,000 clients and raised \$125,000. He rebranded the

company ConBody, and he left his job at Goodwill to run it full-time.

"I always wanted to have my own business and step away from drugs, but I was stuck on making so much money," he told me. These days, he is focused on using his talent to create a product that contributes positively to his community. Coss's clients are mostly young professionals—"the same people I sold drugs to," he said. But now, he is touching their lives in a very different way.

COSS'S STORY CONTAINS an important insight: living purposefully requires self-reflection and self-knowledge. Each of us has different strengths, talents, insights, and experiences that shape who we are. And so each of us will have a different purpose, one that fits with who we are and what we value—one that fits our identity.

The famed twentieth-century psychologist Erik Erikson described identity as complex and multifaceted; it involves not only who a person is but also where he comes from, where he is going, and how he fits into society and the broader world. Someone who has a solid grasp of his identity knows his core beliefs, his values and life goals, and how his groups and communities have shaped him. He is able to answer the central question that emerges during young adulthood, which is: *What kind of person am I and what kind of person do I want to be?* And yet identity isn't static. At every stage of life, he must actively revisit these questions. Toward the end of life, that means asking not *What kind of person do I want to be?* but *What kind of person have I been, and am I okay with that?* A person who has lived according to his values and ac-

complished his life goals will feel "ego integrity," as Erikson put it, instead of "despair."

Researchers at Texas A&M University have examined the tight relationship between identity and purpose, and they've found that knowing oneself is one of the most important predictors of meaning in life. In one study, a group of psychologists led by Rebecca Schlegel had undergraduates list ten traits that best represented who they were deep down, their "true self," as opposed to the inauthentic self they sometimes presented to others.

About a month later, the students returned to the lab to complete the second part of the study. As the students performed random tasks on a computer, the researchers flashed the words that the students had used to define their true selves on the screen for 40 milliseconds—too fast to visually register and consciously process. The students who were subconsciously reminded of their true selves subsequently rated their lives as more meaningful than they had before the study. Being reminded of your authentic self, even subconsciously, makes life feel more meaningful.

There's a reason for that. "Our culturally shared sources of meaning are dwindling," Schlegel said, "so people have to turn inward to figure out how to best lead their lives. Knowing your true self is the first step of that journey." People who know themselves can choose to pursue paths that align with their values and skills. Someone whose strengths are love and zest, for example, may make a great educator. But you don't have to change careers to put your talents to use. That same person could also use those gifts to connect with and serve his clients as a lawyer. Research shows that when people use their strengths at work, they find more meaning in their jobs and

ultimately perform better. And when they pursue goals that align with their core values and interests, they feel more satisfied and competent. They're also likelier to persevere through challenges to actually accomplish those goals—that is, they are more purposeful.

The story of Manjari Sharma, a Brooklyn-based photographer, reveals the central role identity plays in helping us discover our purpose. Manjari's purpose as an artist is tightly tied to who she is and where she came from, and her journey offers some clues about how people come to know themselves.

Manjari was born in Mumbai, India. She grew up in a Hindu household where the divine was a constant presence. Her childhood home was filled with representations of deities—as were the shows she watched on television, like *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana*, both based on ancient Hindu epics whose myths captivated her growing up. When Manjari went on family vacations across India with her parents, her mother always took her to visit the nearby Hindu temples, some of them over five thousand years old, where she stood in awe before paintings and sculptures of deities like Vishnu, the majestic protector of the universe, and Shiva, its ferocious destroyer and transformer, who is often depicted dancing on the back of a demon.

Viewing these figures as a child inspired a *darshan* in Manjari. *Darshan* is the Sanskrit word for “glimpse” or “apparition”; it means seeing the essence of something. In Hinduism, a *darshan* refers to having a momentary connection to the divine in worship. Manjari only had such experiences from time to time in the temples, but they left their mark on her imagination.

Though Manjari has devoted her adult life to art, she had no intention of becoming an artist when she was younger; she wanted to be a dietician. But when she got to college in Munn-

bai and saw the thick textbooks that she would be required to read, with their unending lists of caloric counts, her eyes glazed over. She decided to study visual communications instead, though she had no clear idea of what she wanted to do with the degree.

But then serendipity struck. With the help of a mentor, Manjari began to discover where her calling lay. A freshman photography class required her to snap some pictures every now and then. At the end of the year, her professor gave her the equivalent of the “best student of the year” award in photography.

She was shocked. “Really? Was I really that good?” she wondered. “I was completely caught off guard. I was just taking pictures without paying much attention,” she said. “What if I started to pay more attention?”

To this day, Manjari, who has had her work exhibited internationally, considers her professor’s award the most meaningful piece of recognition she has received as an artist. He not only awakened Manjari’s calling in art, but also encouraged her to travel to the United States to study photography, which she did in 2001 at the Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio.

There, she was “culture shocked,” she said. For one thing, her ideas about America came to her via Hollywood. When she got to Columbus, she looked around and wondered, “Where are all the people?” She was lonely and missed home, but eventually she adjusted—and she soon realized that those feelings of estrangement could be transformed into something artistically productive. “When you are pushed out of your comfort zone—when you experience alienation—amazing things happen,” she said. For Manjari, coming to America pushed her into developing an artistic vision tied to her childhood experiences.

Once Manjari left home, she did not continue to practice Hinduism regularly. Though religious ritual was central to her daily life in India, in America her focus shifted to immersing herself in art, from the art history classes that she took, to the art projects she was working on, to the museums that she visited with classmates. "I went from being in a country where art was worshipped in temples to a country where art was venerated and placed on a pedestal in museums," she said. The art museums recalled the Hindu temples she visited as a child on road trips with her family. As in a temple, there was a ritualistic component to going to the museum: the standing in line, the anticipation, the connection with a piece of art. "It had all the ingredients of a *darshan*," Manjari said.

That insight sparked Manjari's most ambitious project to date. *Darshan*, as it's called, is a series of nine large photographic representations of Hindu gods and goddesses. These images, Manjari told me, are meant to stir the viewer in the same way that being in a temple, surrounded by the presence of the divine, electrifies the pilgrim.

Creating *Darshan* involved more than just taking pictures of nine models in fancy clothes. It was itself a ritual. For each portrait, Manjari worked with a crew of over thirty craftsmen to create an elaborate diorama that she then photographed. All of the objects that appear in the final portrait—from the jewelry and costumes to the props and sets—were handcrafted, painted, sewn, and assembled in a workshop in India into a traditional representation of the deity. The craftsmen, painters, workers, and models were not just hired help—what was most important to Manjari was that each person working on the project shared her vision. "I wanted everyone to have a special relationship to the set we were building together. That way, each crewmember would be personally invested in the

project. Many people can come together to create something bigger than themselves," Manjari said.

The series is full of rich, bright colors and psychedelic imagery, and each portrait, like each deity, is utterly unique. The first portrait that Manjari completed with her crew is a radiant image of the goddess Lakshmi seated on a pink lotus flower with white bejeweled elephants behind her. Lakshmi is the goddess of material and spiritual fortune and, in the image, gold coins drop from the palm of her hand. In another portrait, Maa Saraswati, the goddess of art, music, and education, sits on a clay-colored boulder in a jungle and plays a stringed instrument with a peacock at her foot. And in yet another, Lord Hanuman, the monkey god, holds up a mountain with one hand as his tail floats in the air behind him.

Hanuman was the deity that made the greatest impression on Manjari when she was young. The story goes that Hanuman was very mischievous as a child, using his special powers of flight and transformation to sneak up on meditating sages and disturb them with pranks. One day, the sages punished him with a curse: Hanuman would forget his special gifts and powers, and would only remember them when he was truly in need of them to do good. That myth taught Manjari a valuable lesson about purpose. "We are capable of something unique, each one of us, but it takes time to find out what that is," she said. "There are all these layers that cover up our true potential, and it's not until the time is right that we might discover who we are truly meant to become or transform into. Just like Lord Hanuman."

Manjari's journey of self-discovery took nearly a decade, and it involved lots of twists and turns. With the help of a mentor, she devoted herself to pursuing art. Then, moving to an unfamiliar place, the United States, expanded her boundaries

and gave her the opportunity to gain greater clarity about who she was—which, in turn, helped her develop a series of topics to address in her art. She was, she realized, someone who has a deep connection to myth, religion, and spirituality, and her works bear this imprint of her identity. “I learned that my artistic sense comes from the fact that I love myths and people’s stories,” she said. “I love telling them, hearing them, learning from them, and re-creating them in pictures.”

Manjari looked over at the prints tacked across the white walls of her studio—pictures of her mother in a sari on an Indian beach, of the god Vishnu rising from the clouds like Venus from the sea, and of a father holding his newborn child to his chest in the shower. “That’s my purpose,” she said, “to tell a meaningful story that moves people the way I was moved by these stories.”

Of course, self-knowledge is not enough on its own. Coss knew his strengths from a very young age and used them to achieve his goals as a drug dealer. Manjari took longer to discover her unique gifts and didn’t find her purpose as an artist until she discovered that her work had the capacity to inspire others. For both of them, finding purpose required a critical step beyond self-knowledge: using that knowledge to figure out how they could best contribute to society. Today, they employ their skills to help others live better lives—Coss by helping people stay healthy and Manjari by creating an elevating experience for her audience.

THOUGH LIVING WITH purpose may make us happier and more determined, a purpose-driven person is ultimately concerned not with these personal benefits but with making the world a better place. Indeed, many great thinkers have argued

that in order for individuals to live meaningful lives, they must cultivate the strengths, talents, and capacities that lie within them and use them for the benefit of others.

That idea was expressed forcefully by the eighteenth-century German thinker Immanuel Kant. Kant asks us to consider a man—one like so many of us today—who “finds in himself a talent that by means of some cultivation could make him a useful human being in all sorts of respects. However, he sees himself in comfortable circumstances and prefers to give himself up to gratification rather than to make the effort to expand and improve his fortunate natural predispositions.” What should this man do? Should he abandon the cultivation of his natural talents for a life of enjoyment and ease? Or should he pursue his purpose?

These questions are the driving force behind the 1997 movie *Good Will Hunting*. The story begins with Will, a psychologically troubled twenty-year-old from South Boston. Will drifts purposelessly through life, working as a janitor at MIT and spending most of his free time drinking with his friends, even though he is a genius who can solve math problems that the graduate students at MIT cannot. When he gets in trouble for assaulting a police officer, Will gets a lucky break: an MIT professor, Gerald Lambeau, intervenes on his behalf. The judge agrees to release Will to Lambeau’s supervision under the condition that he meet with Lambeau regularly to work on math.

Lambeau wants Will to put his talent to good use, so he does his best to mentor him and arranges job interviews for him with prestigious employers. But Will is defiant. He is not interested in developing his mathematical genius. He mocks his interviewers during their meetings and insults Lambeau, calling his research a joke. Later, when Will’s best friend,

Chuckie, asks him how his interviews are going, Will implies he's not interested in being a "lab rat." He'd rather stay in South Boston and work in construction.

But Chuckie, like Lambeau, doesn't want Will to waste his potential—and he tells his friend that his attitude is selfish. "You don't owe it to yourself. You owe it to me. 'Cause tomorrow," Chuckie says, "I'm gonna wake up and I'll be 50, and I'll still be doin' this shit. And that's all right, that's fine." Will, however, has the chance to live a better life by putting his skills to work—skills that his friends, Chuckie explains, would do anything to have. But he's too afraid. It would be an "insult to us if you're still here in 20 years," Chuckie says, and a waste of Will's time.

Should Will throw away his gifts because he does not want to cultivate them, or should he doggedly work to perfect his skills and master his craft, as Lambeau and Chuckie want him to do?

For Kant—as for Chuckie and Lambeau—the answer is clear: a rational person, Kant explains, "necessarily wills that all capacities in him be developed, because they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes." That is, his talents can benefit others and society, and so he has a moral obligation to cultivate them. Kant's ideas, as the contemporary philosopher Gordon Marino points out, fly in the face of the current cultural imperative, often heard during graduation season, to "do what you love." To Kant, the question is not what makes you happy. The question is how to do your duty, how to best contribute—or, as the theologian Frederick Buechner put it, your vocation lies "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

* * *

NOT EVERYONE HAS a calling as obvious as Will Hunting's, of course. In the real world, the majority of people have to choose jobs that they are qualified to get, and that hopefully pay enough to support them and their families. The four most common occupations in America are retail salesperson, cashier, food preparer and server, and office clerk, low-paying and often rote jobs that don't scream "meaningful work"—at least not on their face.

Even those with more options often find themselves at sea when it comes time to find a fulfilling career. Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor at the Yale School of Management and a leading scholar on meaning at work, told me that she senses a great deal of anxiety among her students and clients. "They think their calling is under a rock," she said, "and that if they turn over enough rocks, they will find it." If they do not find their one true calling, she went on to say, they feel like something is missing from their lives and that they will never find a job that will satisfy them. And yet only about one third to one half of people whom researchers have surveyed see their work as a calling. Does that mean the rest will not find meaning and purpose in their careers?

Adam Grant, a Wharton School of Business professor who studies how people find meaning at work, would argue that it does not. Grant points out that those who consistently rank their jobs as meaningful have something in common: they see their jobs as a way to help others. In a survey of over 2 million individuals across over 500 different jobs, those who reported finding the most meaning in their careers were clergy, English teachers, surgeons, directors of activities and education at religious organizations, elementary and secondary school administrators, radiation therapists, chiropractors, and psychiatrists. These jobs, Grant writes, "are all service jobs. Surgeons and

chiropractors promote physical health. Clergy and religious directors promote spiritual health. Educators promote social and mental health. If these jobs didn't exist, other people would be worse off."

Grant's research offers a clue about how people working in any sector can find purpose at work—by adopting a service mindset. In one study, Grant and his colleagues tracked a group of university-call-center fundraisers who each met a student whose scholarship was being funded by their work. These callers took on a different attitude toward their jobs: seeing how their work affected another person's life made the fundraisers become much more purposeful—and more effective—compared with a control group. They spent 142 percent more time on the phone with potential donors and raised 171 percent more money.

In a study led by Jochen Menges, Grant and his colleagues discovered a similar phenomenon among women working at a coupon-processing factory in Mexico. Typically, workers who do not find their jobs interesting are less motivated and purposeful, and so are less productive on the job. Processing coupons can be dull and repetitive, so you might expect the women at the factory who found the job boring to be less productive than those who found it rewarding. That, indeed, is what Grant and Menges found. But that trend was reversed among a certain subset of women—those who adopted a service mindset. The women who found their work dull were just as productive and energized as those who found it rewarding, but only if they saw their work as a way to support their families. Even the most tedious tasks can be made purposeful when they benefit the people you love.

Parents perhaps know the value of a service mindset better than anyone. Raising children is one of the most stressful

but crucial jobs a person can have—and though children can be a source of joy, an oft-cited finding from the psychological research on parenting is that raising kids makes parents unhappy. Parents sacrifice their personal time and space for their children, they lose sleep as a result of their kids, and they are constantly engaged in tiring tasks like changing diapers and enforcing discipline. At the same time, though, many studies show that raising children is a powerful source of meaning. As one mother told me, "It's blood and guts and makes me want to pull out my hair sometimes." But, she added, it is also "tremendously rewarding." Parenting gives people an opportunity to put aside their own interests for the sake of another. All of the difficult and tedious work of being a parent lies in the service of a larger purpose—helping a child grow into a responsible adult.

IN THE FINAL paragraph of *Middlemarch*, the novelist George Eliot pays a tribute to those individuals who keep the world moving forward in small yet indispensable ways: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

Those many millions of people, though they may not be remembered or known by you and me, made a difference for the people they encountered in their daily lives.

The ability to find purpose in the day-to-day tasks of living and working goes a long way toward building meaning. It was the mindset, for instance, adopted by the janitor John F. Kennedy ran into at NASA in 1962. When the president asked him what he was doing, the janitor apparently responded

saying that he was “helping put a man on the moon.” It was the mindset adopted by a roadworker who was directing the flow of traffic near a repair site on a stretch of Colorado highway several years ago. Standing in the sun, he periodically turned a sign that read “Stop” on one side and “Slow” on the other. “I keep people safe,” he told a driver who asked him how he could stand such boring work. “I care about these guys behind me,” he continued, “and I keep them safe. I also keep you safe, and everyone else in all those cars behind you.” And it was a mindset adopted by a food cart owner a few years ago when my friend realized, after ordering, that he had forgotten his wallet. “My job isn’t to take your money,” he told my friend. “My job,” he said, handing my friend his taco, “is to feed you.”

Not all of us will find our calling. But that doesn’t mean we can’t find purpose. The world is full of retail clerks, coupon sorters, accountants, and students. It is full of highway flaggers, parents, government bureaucrats, and bartenders. And it is full of nurses, teachers, and clergy who get bogged down in paperwork and other day-to-day tasks, and sometimes lose sight of their broader mission. Yet no matter what occupies our days, when we reframe our tasks as opportunities to help others, our lives and our work feel more significant. Each of us has a circle of people—in our families, in our communities, and at work—whose lives we can improve. That’s a legacy everyone can leave behind.

4

Storytelling

ERIK KOLBELL VIVIDLY REMEMBERS THE SUMMER in 2003 when his daughter Kate got her first job. Kate, who was then fourteen and living in New York with her family, had been hired to work as a mother’s helper in the Hamptons. She was excited to move to Long Island and assume some of the responsibilities of adulthood. But her life, and Erik’s, came to a screeching halt two weeks after she started working. On July 31, Erik received a call from his wife: “Kate’s been hit by a car.”

“The next thing I remember,” Erik said, “was driving in the car out to Stony Brook Hospital and not knowing how serious it was, what condition she was in, where she was hit, or if she was alive.” He eventually learned that she was in surgery with a pediatric neurosurgeon. That, Erik said, gave him three pieces of information: “Number one: she was alive. Number two: this was serious. Number three: neurosurgeon. She had a brain injury.”

At the hospital, Erik was led to a private waiting area, where the neurosurgeon came in to see him and his wife. “She is in a medically induced coma,” the doctor said. “Her vitals are stable. We had to remove a piece of her skull,” he continued, “in order to relieve the pressure on her head, on her