

MEANINGFUL WORK

Lin Murphy

Behind the sometimes seemingly random or even chaotic succession of events in our lives as well as in the world lies concealed the unfolding of a higher order and purpose.

—Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*

Sometimes we learn what is meaningful to us by finding out what isn't.

Finding our place in the world of work is not a straight line. It's a winding road, with peaks and valleys; with yield, stop, and go signs. It changes, depending on where you go and the people you meet along the way.

Most of us start thinking about careers toward the end of high school. In my case, I was thinking about being a gym teacher. Gym was my favorite class. I was happiest when I could jump around and move my body. I was the captain of the cheerleaders, and I loved to dance, surf, ski, play tennis, and do anything else that let me expend an overabundance of teenage energy.

After researching programs in Physical Education, I found out from my parents that there was no money for college. That summer, my dreams were dashed, but I didn't give up on finding a way to get educated and finding a career that I enjoyed. That setback

WORKING STORIES

gave me time to question becoming a gym teacher. My own gym teacher blew a whistle and gave directions, but did not participate in the activities themselves.

I had a boyfriend at the time who was bound for medical school, so I started thinking about doing something in the medical field. I found a program in medical technology at the local community college.

I spent two years studying organic chemistry, math, and biology, and learning how to run medical tests, which involved a lot of mathematical calculation.

While doing an internship in a hospital, I learned that there were two things I did not enjoy and did not want to be doing for work: math and sitting at a lab table all day long. I gave up medical technology, and also the boyfriend.

Neither was right for me. The boyfriend was always criticizing me and wanting to shape me into someone I wasn't and am not, and I was attempting to please him. This is a recipe for misery. Still, breaking up is never easy, and I felt lost. After spending a summer in San Diego, California, attempting to find myself, I enrolled in Richmond College, the City University of New York—a working-class college. The majority of the students were enrolled in practical business and engineering programs. At the same time, college campuses across the country were on fire with political activism.

I spent much of my time at the Staten Island Peace Coalition, organizing to end the war in Vietnam. I learned a lot about politics and community organizing.

In the '60s, everything was up for grabs. New programs, such as Women's Studies and Integrated Studies, were being introduced. There were breakthroughs in science and quantum physics. We were young, the music was amazing, and we believed we could change the world. I had an adviser who believed in, and encouraged, me.

This freedom of thought was new to me, coming out as I was from a conservative working-class family. My parents lived through the Depression. What was important to them was having enough

work to provide food, clothing, and shelter; certainly not lofty ideals, like meaning, purpose, and creating social change.

During my college years, I met dedicated, spirited, and courageous people. We were passionate. Our large-scale opposition to the war in Vietnam helped to end it. We were engaged in a massive shift in consciousness across every field and institution, and it was thrilling to be a part of it.

I met Ed Murphy at Richmond College during training in non-violence and civil disobedience. We were preparing for a protest in Washington, D.C., against the Vietnam War. Ed had returned from military service in Vietnam and came to Richmond College to earn a degree. He was the president of the student body, and an outspoken critic of the war. Ed and I became life partners. We shared values and we had fun together. We were both rebels, and enjoyed skipping class to go for a ride on the Staten Island Ferry.

During this tumultuous time as a student, I found that I enjoyed studying human behavior. I took courses in psychology and pathology, as well as leadership development and organizational change.

I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and went on to California for a Master's degree in Community Psychology. Ed and I founded a non-profit organization called Pathfinders Institute. We wanted to continue to work on projects related to peace and non-violence, and to help people find their path to peace. We developed one of the first programs to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) before it was even recognized by the medical community.

After a long career as director of Pathfinders Institute, counseling Vietnam veterans with PTSD, and other victims of trauma, I transitioned into the new field of Transformational Life Coaching.

Coaching uses the analogy of a sports coach, but applied to the game of life. The purpose is to help people reach their full potential and overcome beliefs and actions that sabotage their desires, plans, and dreams. I trained with the world-class Coaches Training Institute. I use a co-active model, which means that the process is a dialogue about what works, and how to have effective relationships. I don't tell people what they should do with their lives. I ask power-

WORKING STORIES

ful questions to help people discern what's meaningful to them.

The focus of my coaching is wellness and balancing work and life.

I had a long-term dream to start a holistic health center with like-minded colleagues, so I helped found One Roof Holistic Health Center in Saratoga Springs, New York. The town is famous for its “Health, History, Horses.” There is a famous racetrack, but also mineral springs and a spa, where people come from all over the world to drink and soak in the natural spring waters.

My office is in a beautiful old Victorian house, furnished with antiques and beautiful Turkish rugs. The colors are soft and soothing, and people comment that they feel better just walking in the door. They come to heal trauma, manage stress, and find more meaning and balance.

As I age, I'm now fascinated with this new leg of the journey. I want to learn about it, while I experience new challenges and spiritual opportunities. How do we age with grace? I facilitate a program in “Conscious Aging,” where a group of elders can explore and write about issues of aging and death.

As a psychotherapist, life coach, and change agent, here are some things I've learned about meaning in work: What makes work meaningful is different for each of us; there is no one definition; our purpose is constantly evolving as we try things out, meet people, learn new things, and travel to new places.

Any job can be meaningful. The question is, “What makes you come alive?”

Here is what some of my clients say about what makes them excited about their work:

“I get to share my inherent gifts and talents—I am creative and naturally good at music and art. I need to create to thrive.”

“I'm able to make a positive impact on the lives of others; I volunteer for an organization that is helping one village in Kenya to build a school. It gives me satisfaction to know I'm making a difference in the lives of the neediest kids on our planet.”

“I'm a stay-at-home mom for now, and I wouldn't have it any

other way.”

“I work hard and am rewarded well. I’m able to provide for my family. That makes me feel good.”

“When I am fully engaged and am acknowledged for my work by my employer.”

We have a purpose when we say *yes* to what is ours to do and *no* to what is not ours to do. Many feel stuck in a job that they hate and are only doing it for the paycheck or benefits. This is true of many state workers, where the institution stifles creativity and initiative, and they feel buried in rules, regulations, and paperwork.

In my generation, we were encouraged to be practical and to choose work based on its ability to provide security and financial stability only, rather than seeing it as an opportunity for alignment with our passions and dreams. We did away with arranged marriages, and should have a new vision for our livelihood.

One visionary, Matthew Fox, author of *The Reinvention of Work*, refers to “The Great Work” of the universe. We are all part of one unifying spirit that moves through us for the good of all. When we are aligned with this force, we are doing what we love and serving the whole.

We are not just cogs in a machine, meant to push paper and produce things that we don’t need, or that do damage to ourselves and our environment.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a professor at Harvard Business School, said in a recent Harvard Business Review:

“Great companies identify something larger than transactions for business portfolios to provide purpose and meaning. Meaning-making is a central function of leaders, and purpose gives coherence to the organization.

Meaning-making is understanding what makes employees tick and creating environments where people can make a brilliant difference.”

If you’re doing something consistent with who you are and your values, then you’re on track. If you’re not, you can change.

A client of mine named Bill came in with the following story:

WORKING STORIES

“My father was a lawyer and he wanted me to be a lawyer and eventually take over his firm, so I did.

I feel like I’m in the wrong field and never stopped to think what it was that I wanted. I can’t change now... I have student loans and a mortgage, and I’m stuck.”

I reminded Bill that it is important to remember that you are never trapped in a job or a career, despite how it seems. Once he believed this, we worked to find options.

He continued part-time with his law practice while he pursued his passion for fitness and wellness. He is now a personal trainer, and is enjoying his new career. Bill was able to make a transition into another career where he felt more aligned with what he did 40 hours a week.

When discussing meaningful work, we have to talk about values.

Getting clear on your values and then exploring how you are or are not honoring them is a pathway to success. For example, most women value relationships highly, in and out of work. I enjoy networking, having conversations with clients about their hopes and fears, and talking about possibilities. It comes naturally.

Being clear about your values, and then expressing them through your work and relationships, creates fulfillment. But finding work that matters isn’t always easy. Sometimes, a job is just a job. We work to earn money to pay our bills.

A single mom with no skills may work one or more minimum-wage jobs to feed her kids. This is necessary and honorable.

Fulfillment can come from doing what you love in other areas of life. Life is not all about work, after all.

For example, I often hear, “I want to be a writer,” and everyone I know wants to write a book. The standard joke is “keep your day job”.

When I ask, “Are you writing?” and I hear, “Yes, I write every chance I get, because I must,” then I encourage this person to explore the possibilities of earning a living from her writing. Otherwise, I tell her to write for pleasure.

Meaning and happiness do not come from making money alone.

There are billionaires who are not happy.

Every human being has value, regardless of the size of their paycheck or their job. People find meaning in all sorts of places other than work: in their families and relationships, playing sports, working for political candidates to help get them elected, church, book clubs, travel, or volunteering, to name just a few.

Here are a few questions to consider:

- What is it that I most deeply desire to experience in life?
- What is it that I most deeply desire to express in life?
- What is it that I most deeply desire to create in life?
- What is it that I most deeply desire to contribute to life?

Meaningful work is subjective. It is different for every one of us.

I have discussed some commonalities in this essay. We are able to use our innate gifts and develop the skills we need along the way. Meaningful work is bigger than the way we make our living. Meaning comes not only from our jobs but from other parts of our life, such as our health, relationships, environment, and spiritual and personal growth.

We find meaning when our work is bigger than ourselves and we feel connected to a larger cause, when what we do is aligned with our values and unique purpose, and when we are making a contribution that benefits others.