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the  
secrets to  
happiness  
at work

*How to* Choose and Create Purpose  
and Fulfillment in Your Work

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## 1

*Choosing Joy*

Work can be joyful, but it can also be weighed down with myths that we must dispel. It's really not about work-life balance; there is an alternative view. Our brains also have a bearing on our joyful experiences, and we can create joy through cultivating the right kinds of experiences with our work.

**Creating Joy**

Joy at work isn't something we should wait for. True happiness is something we can choose and create.

When you're selecting a company, leader, or job, you can choose joy. When you're influencing your responsibilities and working together with colleagues, you can choose happiness. And when you're making sense of your work, you can choose a joyful approach.

While this empowerment is heady, it can also be daunting. As Marianne Williamson stated, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." If we're capable of choosing joy, then we are also *responsible* for our joy.

In terms of responsibility, it's a both-and situation. As individuals, we can appreciate this concept of agency—that we are agents of our own future. But there is also structure, the social systems and organizational systems that dictate many of our experiences. It is fair that we consider both but also that we realize "they are us." We can influence other people, we can lead—even if we are not formal leaders—and we can demonstrate our values. Socially speaking, the most important way

people learn is through modeling—through observing other people—so we have greater influence than we may even realize, simply through demonstrating our values and inspiring joy in our own work.

## Avoiding the Myths

In the world of popular culture, there are a lot of voices claiming to have the best formula to achieve work-life fulfillment. However, much of this cacophony is just noise. In fact, a lot of our understanding of work-life fulfillment is nothing but myth. Some such myths include the following.

**The myth of drudgery.** We tend to think of work as must-do drudgery. But, in fact, work is a valuable part of our lives. In *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande makes the point that one of the worst things we can hear is that we're no longer needed or that our contribution is no longer a critical part of society. At its best, work should be fulfilling, and we should keep our expectations high

for the role it plays in our lives. At a minimum, work is a means to important ends like providing for our families or paying for activities that allow us to grow and enjoy life. Either way, work doesn't have to equal a negative experience. It can be a rewarding pursuit.

**The myth of sacrifice.** Another problem with the work-life discussion is that it points to sacrifice. According to popular lore, we can't have everything, but in truth, we *can* have it all—just not all at once. There are seasons of life, and some will be busier than others. While you're building your career and juggling your job, family, and self, things will be more challenging than when you're winding down and struggling to ensure that your contribution is still relevant. Enjoy where you are, and know that you *will* have it all over time—even if you won't have it all at once.

**The myth of separation.** Fundamentally, work is part of a full life. While we may think we want to relax on an island for the rest of our lives, this may not be true for the longer term. (After all, how much relaxing can

one person really do?) In a fascinating series of studies published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, people were asked whether they would still work if they won the lottery. The proportion of people saying yes varied over the years between 80 percent and about 66 percent. Some years it was higher, and some years it was lower, but overall, the majority of people responded that they would want to continue working even if they didn't need to for financial reasons. Work is important because it's part of our lives and a critical way we contribute to society and feel valuable.

**The myth of perfection.** One of the most damaging myths is the idea that there is a perfect job or career and that whatever we have today isn't enough. While striving for the next great thing is a unique part of being human, being satisfied with what we have is critical to happiness as well. In reality, your current role is an opportunity for learning and growth, whether the challenge is to excel in a perfect-fit job or to survive where you are until you can make a move.

**The myth of value.** Another myth our popular culture fosters is the idea that some work is inherently more valuable than other work. This is bunk. All work has dignity and value, no matter what kind of work it is. Recently, I engaged with a client who believed the most important work of their organization happened in the field, where they supported those in need. Unfortunately, this client was inadvertently devaluing the efforts of all the employees in the office who were supporting the field agents. *All work matters*, even if it is upstream from the jobs most closely connected to the end user or customer.

Getting entangled in the myths of work and life can be disorienting and disheartening, but the realities are much more simple and meaningful. Work should be fulfilling, and you can have it all. Work and life are both parts of a whole experience, and there is enough great work to go around. In addition, there is no perfect role, but all work—no matter what kind—has importance and dignity.

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