



AN

AUTHENTIC HUMAN'S



GUIDE

TO

FINDING

MEANINGFUL WORK



Deborah Mourey

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An Authentic Human's Guide to Finding Meaningful Work

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS MEANINGFUL WORK?

It's hard to find work you love; it must be, if so few do. So, don't underestimate this task. And don't feel bad if you haven't succeeded yet. In fact, if you admit to yourself that you're discontented, you're a step ahead of most people.

—Paul Graham, “How to Do What You Love”¹

When I was thinking about writing this book, I knew I wanted to write about more than just searching for work; there are lots of resources for that (see the appendix). But how do we find *meaningful work*? That is, work that fuels us—work that helps us grow and build community, that nourishes our sense of self-worth, where we can be our best selves. Not just our profession but the way we spend our limited time and creativity to earn a living.

Most of us will spend more time at work than we will with our loved ones. Meaningful work, whatever our definition, is critical to our well-being. The more we do what we love, the fewer headaches, crushed spirits, and world-weariness we'll experience.

In the satisfying work that I finally found for myself, I have the privilege of interacting regularly with people in their teens, twenties, and thirties, those of you called millennials and Gen Z. You all have taught me so much; I am grateful to know you.

There are so many things I appreciate and respect about millennials and Gen Z. One is your desire to be authentic, which is accompanied by a talent for quickly spotting a phony. In addition, you have an expectation of workplace diversity and inclusion that is significantly more accepting than that of previous generations. You understand that we are all better off when we accept ourselves and others, regardless of gender, economic status, race, creed, etc.

But when I talked with some of you about your work journey, I heard

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frustration, disappointment, confusion, and sadness. My goal with this book is to offer relief, optimism, fortitude, clarity, and hopefully even a little joy.

I learned throughout my career that there wasn't much support for finding meaningful work. There were lots of people willing to give me advice on their way, but not many people encouraged me to do it my way. I wanted to find work that matched who I was, that honored my skills—and my need to earn a living. Through my career's twists and turns, I eventually found work that was meaningful to me.

I was most successful when I was clear about myself and what I needed and wanted and when I reached out for help. I learned that with self-awareness, experimentation, persistence, and luck (for example, meeting the right person at the right time), I could change the course of my career in wonderful and unexpected ways. The road to meaningful work will be different for each person.

Each of us can make our own rules and find our own answers through using tools like the ones in this book and then running our own experiments. A career is a journey—there is no getting around that. And it's often bumpy and messy. Like many worthwhile things in life, it takes time, patience, and commitment. But I hope the ideas in this book will help ease your journey. Please take what you like and leave the rest.

Building a Foundation

This book is built around the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{My values (who I am at this point in my life)} \\ & + \\ & \text{My skills (current and those I hope to gain)} \\ & + \\ & \text{My available resources (people/tools)} \\ & + \\ & \text{My actions (experimenting, questioning, taking risks)} \\ & = \\ & \text{A path to meaningful work} \end{aligned}$$

Part 1 of this book focuses on the first part of the formula:

understanding who you are today. It involves inner work—assessing who you are and where you're at right now. You will have different needs throughout your life; partnering, children, promotions, responsibilities, etc., will all shift your priorities. The future will be filled with surprises, so trying to figure out who you're going to be or what you'll need in your career in ten or twenty years is counterproductive. Instead, the first part of the formula is designed to help you understand who you are right now.

1. What are my values? Who am I at this point in my life?

Understanding yourself includes understanding your values. Without this self-knowledge, the chances of finding a good fit at work are hobbled. Values tend to shift slowly. We bring with us values from family, religion, hometown, ethnicity, race, education, and experience...in other words, from our roots. Values are personal; what is important to you may be different from what is important even to someone close to you. Understanding some of your key points of connection to the world (your values!) gives you a leg up in your search for meaningful work.

2. What are my skills currently, and which ones do I hope to gain?

A skills assessment starts with determining what you are naturally good at. Some of us are good with numbers, some are artistic, some pick up foreign languages easily. Acknowledging your talents is an appropriate way to begin assessing our current skill set.

The next step is to identify skills you want to learn, either because they interest you or because you know they are something useful to the career you seek. If you want to run a company, you will need managerial skills. It's possible that managerial skills training will be offered to you along the way, but are you willing to leave that to chance? I suggest you don't. It's better if you identify the skills you want to learn and find a way to gain the experience you need.

Once you understand who you are and where you are today, the next step is to understand your available choices and learn how to recognize that you have more choices than perhaps you thought. Part 2 of this book helps you identify the outer work you need to do: identifying and connecting the ideas, actions, resources, and people to help you on your journey.

3. What are my available resources?

This means identifying and activating people who can help you find meaningful work. Your community, families, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and especially those few who recognize and accept you for what you are: precious. But each of these people will play a unique role in your career search. Identifying resources means understanding which question to ask your best friend versus that contact who works in a field you're interested in. Activating means doing the work to earn others' help. You can't expect everyone to drop what's important to them to help you. You need to learn to give to get. Mentors are valuable resources, but you need to take initiative to earn their trust.

4. What actions can I take right now?

Reasonable (to you) risk-taking becomes vital to the journey of finding meaningful work. One of my favorite sayings is "Don't try harder—try different." That makes sense in principle, but what does "different" mean, if you don't know what to do? It may feel especially tough to live this idea of different when we have responsibilities. For example, trying to change the way your boss communicates is tough. If you pay attention to the way they like to communicate and work within that, your relationship may improve. Those are the kinds of tweaks of perspective I mean when I say trying different can help.

The ideas in this book helped me find meaningful work, and I trust that some of them will help you realize your options too. Experimenting with different tools and trying them out, first in low-risk situations, to understand how they fit, is an important part of the journey. These experiments are like trying on new clothes. Some look and feel great; some are terrible. We only know when we try them on.

A Path to Meaningful Work

Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice in Wonderland*, said, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." I encourage you throughout this book to know yourself, understand what you want from a workplace (one workplace at a time), and be clear about what you want to learn when you take the next job. The You Work It sections of this book include exercises that help you clarify your values, what you want to learn, and how you might experiment in ways that you may not have considered. Your path to meaningful work will become clearer. You will find and catch the thread of what you love to do.

What I Hope You Will Gain from This Book

This isn't an "advice" book; it's a "huh, I never thought of it that way" book. In my years as a teacher, mentor, and coach, I found people benefit most from being asked thought-provoking questions. So, I hope these *ideas*—not rules—will fuel your journey. I hope you find new choices to help you navigate the world of finding work that is meaningful to you. I hope you take inspiration from some of the lessons I've learned along the way and from the stories of people (found in the case studies) who have inspired me. And then I hope you plunge forward. No one else can tell you what job to take or how to plan your career. You will know what to do. Trust yourself.

For me, meaningful work wasn't about *what* I would be when I grew up but, rather, *who* I would be. Current research² suggests that seeking your purpose is better than following your passion. I can be passionate about singing but know that it is not my purpose, that is, how I imagine myself contributing to the world. Passion and purpose may overlap, but for many people, they don't. One thing is certain: earning a living from having a purpose is a key to finding meaningful work. It's useful to think about what matters to you—your skills, your values, your financial needs, and other aspects of your unique experiences. Your path may lean traditional or unorthodox. It may include higher education or limited classroom education...either way, there is a path out there for you.

It's likely that some combination of passion, purpose, skills, self-compassion, hard work, and a little luck will be the hallmarks of your successful work journey—one that is driven by you and your vision and needs. As you read this book, I hope you will come to recognize in yourself what I finally came to know in myself—that we have the power to change not only ourselves but our choices. We don't have to let other people define who we are or what we can do. I believe, with my whole heart, that each of us has tremendous potential.

The uncertainty from trial and error that is involved in any change is to be expected. After all, you are trying to answer big questions: "How can I think differently about where I work, how I work, the money I make, and the life I shape that has work as a component, not as a foundation?" To that end, I recommend you start anywhere in the book that seems interesting. The road to finding enjoyable work can be full of prickly bushes and many forks. It takes an adventurous spirit and some risk-taking to make progress. But what is the alternative? Work in jobs, year in and year out, that you hate?

Whether it's via boss shopping, understanding your personal

values as they relate to work, or crafting a work schedule that “fits” with your life, I hope you will assert yourself to find work that sustains you...financially, personally, and emotionally.

I have a deep-seated belief that each of us is special, just as we are, and that once we recognize ourselves as such, doors open for us that we never thought possible. I hope you will find strength and encouragement throughout these pages to be who you are. Since you picked up this book, I can already sense that expressing your authentic self is important to you. I may not know you, but if I met you, I know I would say: *You are amazing.*

Furthermore, you can find meaningful work.

Times Are Changing, Dramatically

I am finishing the writing and editing of this book in the summer of 2020. Much of the world is under lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Unemployment is soaring, and the world economy is in a transition bordering on crisis. The ways we coped, found work, made money, and many other things could be changed forever. Today, there is no way to be sure what is going to change and how much. However, it occurs to me that the information in this book might be even more useful than before as we navigate these new waters. Once the dust settles, a postcrisis period allows us a reset button. We don't have to go back to the way things were. We probably won't have the option to go back. Instead, we can focus on where we *really* want to go.

Tip: It may be useful to keep a notebook for working through the exercises in this book. Many thoughts and ideas will come up as you read through these chapters, and it may be beneficial to have them all in one place. You can also use a computer or your phone or record by voice, but if you're able to write by hand, I recommend that. Writing by hand helps to unlock thoughts and creativity—and a notebook isn't connected to the distractions of email, text, and social media.

PART I: INNER WORK

We begin by taking a close look at ourselves. You may have done some of this work before. If so, you'll have a head start. The idea is to use your self-knowledge as home base. From there, we each fly in a different direction, but seeing ourselves as we are gives us the freedom to go to places we might never have gone. It is important that we each bring a hearty dose of self-compassion to this part of the work. I am my harshest critic. I would never judge someone else as jarringly as I do myself. I had to learn to be as gentle with myself as I was with the people I love. For me, this was part of the journey. Please know there are no right or wrong answers; there's no one to judge you. You can't make a mistake when looking into your heart. You know these answers; the exercises are here to help you name them and use them.

Now, gently, begin. Knowing yourself is vital to finding meaningful work.

CHAPTER I

GOOD INTENTIONS, BAD ADVICE

When you're young, you're given the impression that you'll get enough information to make each choice before you need to make it. But this is certainly not so with work. When you're deciding what to do, you have to operate on ridiculously incomplete information.

—Paul Graham, “How to Do What You Love”

I wish I could say I have never heard someone tell a high school student:

- ❖ You must go to college.
- ❖ You must know what you want to study, before you go.
- ❖ Whatever you pick to study in college, it will change your life forever, so you better be sure.
- ❖ Wherever you choose to go to college, it will affect the rest of your life. So, you better make good grades in high school and then good grades in college. Otherwise, you are going to be a failure.
- ❖ High school is the best time of your life, so appreciate it.

You could probably add other “good” advice to this list. Counselors, parents, friends...they all mean well, but they don't necessarily know you and your dreams. They are giving “standard” advice that's been given to high school kids for generations. I have experienced my own frustration with people telling me what I can't do:

- ❖ You can't work part-time and be a manager.
- ❖ You can't negotiate to set your own work hours.
- ❖ There's no way that you can have a career working part-time.

I could go on and on, but the point is that even forty years ago, when

I was starting out, I got a lot of bad advice. It was given with good intentions. Fortunately, I ignored those people and their advice. For millennials and Gen Z, this type of advice is not only unhelpful...it's bullsh*t. I understand that this advice served people in the past, but so many things have changed in even the past twenty years that this advice is now flat-out wrong.

My suggestion for dealing with that “advice” is to listen and smile politely. Ask questions for clarification. Don't argue with the person. In the future, they might be of help to you; there is no reason to alienate them if you can avoid it. If the person is paying the bills for you (for example, if this person is part of your family), that's another issue. You may need to do at least some of what they request—or try to figure out a compromise. Nothing about this is simple or easy, but I encourage you to follow yourself, no one else, as much as you can.

What's Changed?

People give bad advice because it's what they know or what makes them feel comfortable. They may be afraid of change, and if you change, they might also have to change. They are unaware of the realities you face; they are using their experience to judge your current circumstances. Here are some of the realities that have changed since generations before millennials and Gen Z started working.³

❖ ***Who we work for has changed dramatically.*** In 1985, the biggest companies in the US were mostly in autos and oil. Today, they are aggregators (Amazon) and tech companies. The shift from products to services profoundly affects the work we do.

Biggest US Companies in 1985⁴

1. IBM
2. Exxon
3. General Electric
4. AT&T
5. General Motors

US Biggest Companies in 2020⁵

1. Microsoft
2. Apple
3. Amazon
4. Alphabet (Google parent company)
5. Facebook

- ❖ ***Values have shifted.*** Baby boomers, the generation born 1946–1964, focused on making money, having financial stability, and working hard. I have heard boomer bosses complain about the work ethic of younger generations. I try to explain that the reason for the difference isn't laziness—it's life focus. Boomers felt we needed to sacrifice family life for the security of a job. The younger people I've met are committed to a work-and-leisure balance, to making sure that your work time is spent fruitfully. I leave Gen X out of this work because I don't see the world through their eyes. I'm a boomer who has spent many years talking with, teaching, and interacting with millennials and Gen Zers.
- ❖ ***The cost of college has skyrocketed.*** Cost of college from 1980 to 2014 has grown at twice the rate of other consumer products (260 percent increase for college versus 120 percent for other things).⁶ Student debt was \$1.4 trillion in 2019.⁷ With many graduates starting out with low earning potential, the ability to pay back this debt is crushing.
- ❖ ***The effectiveness of a college education is in question.*** The way a college education is delivered (sitting in classrooms) is questionable. As colleges are slow to update their educational methods, millennials and Gen Z have become frustrated. If the usefulness and methods of delivering knowledge had kept pace with the needs of students (and employers), the costs might be worth it. But the combination of increasing expense and reduced efficacy have made college problematic for many.
- ❖ ***Technology and access to information change our daily lives.*** We all have powerful computers in our pockets (cell phones), and that provides us with instant access to much of the world's knowledge. There's an app for nearly everything we want to accomplish. Thirty years ago, we got information from television, books, and newspapers.
- ❖ ***Millennials have demonstrated not only a desire for balance but a demand for work that means something.*** Many young people are unhappy in their current job, like they are just pushing paper around. The desire to do work that is meaningful is a driving force that many employers don't understand or know how to satisfy. This difference in values limits the jobs that millennials and Gen Z want.
- ❖ ***Millennials are the largest generation in the US labor force.*** In 2017, 56 million millennials (35 percent of the total workforce)⁸ were working or looking for work. In that same year, 41 million boomers were in the workforce.

❖ *Progress has been made in terms of the acceptance of gender diversity in the workplace, but there's not enough equity for millennials and Gen Z.* While the business benefits of diversity and equality have been well-documented for a while now,⁹ certain industries and geographies have been slower to adapt. Previously, the emphasis of diversity in the workplace highlighted women, not LGBTQIA+. I sense a hunger for a broader definition and acceptance of diversity, and those organizations that make progress in this area will benefit from millennial and Gen Z support.

What Does All This Mean for You?

Technological, financial, demographic, and social changes are leading millennials and Gen Z to think differently about work. “Infrastructure” (education, types of jobs, management, financing options, and work/life choices) has not kept up with the needs of this large and diverse group of workers. These changes clash with traditional workplace norms. Finding a company culture that matches with younger generations’ values, needs, and desires is difficult.

In addition, the growth of the entrepreneurial culture has lured millennials and Gen Z to the start-up world. The gig economy (a free-market system in which organizations contract with independent workers for short-term engagements, often with no benefits) is booming. Think of jobs like driving for Uber or Lyft, renting spaces on AirBnB, or delivering for Postmates. Each of these gigs has “make your own hours” flexibility that no office job can offer. As of 2019, 57 million US workers (35 percent) are freelancers.¹⁰

Why This Matters to Me

I’m a baby boomer, so you might be wondering why this topic is so important to me and why I think I have something to say about it. I’ll go deeper into the answer later, but for now, here’s a snapshot of my journey and what led me to write this book.

I have been afforded many privileges; I identify as white and heterosexual. My race has afforded me opportunities not open to other races. Being female in a man’s world, however, meant that I would be discriminated against nearly all my career.

Prior to 1980, the workplace was driven by men. They were hired, given opportunities to grow (and make mistakes), and promoted. It may be hard to imagine now, but women weren’t part of management.

Most women didn't go to college. In the workplace, they were support personnel. Women were encouraged to be teachers, nurses, and bookkeepers.

When I started managing people, I was one of only two female managers in my division of more than nine hundred people. Sexism floated close to the surface but was downplayed by policies that stated it would not be tolerated. There wasn't even a mention of non-gender-conforming people. If they were hired, people who didn't "conform" were barely tolerated. And they certainly weren't given opportunities. I used these roadblocks to find a way to be myself and find innovative solutions to what I wanted for my life. The journey, the tools I used, and the risks I took are shared in this book.

Finding meaningful work seemed like the only logical path. I didn't have to do work I hated or work where I felt that I wasn't seen or appreciated. That's my definition of meaningful. Here is a snapshot of a few of the roles I've held along the way:

- ❖ **Teacher**—I worked as a secondary-school foreign language teacher. I also taught marketing and market research for over fifteen years at the college undergraduate and graduate levels, both online and face-to-face. Teaching is the foundation of my person; it's the through line of all the meaningful work experiences I've had in my life. Students almost always teach me more about being human, learning, and having determination than I teach them. This is my place.
- ❖ **Mentor**—Volunteering as a mentor to young entrepreneurs is one of my passions. For over twenty years, I have worked with both academic and community-based individuals to help them grow their ideas into companies that thrive. This work involves listening, coaching, and instilling confidence and support in learning the lesson that failure is essential to growing a successful business.
- ❖ **Digital marketer**—I love being on the leading edge of technology as it applies to business. Over my forty-year career, I've found technology advancements essential for changing the way businesses provide value to customers. Slow-to-adopt companies fade; companies with visionary leaders thrive.
- ❖ **New-media business leader**—I have been involved with millennials and Gen Z for over a decade as mother of YouTuber Jenna Marbles. I manage the legal and financial sides of her company. I understand firsthand the impact that she has on her audience. As of 2020, she has over 20 million subscribers, and her

worldwide audience watches an average of 40,000 hours of her videos a month.¹¹

From teaching and mentoring to working with young people in new media, I've always been invested in the next generations. Having trained and worked as a teacher and being a technology "appreciator," I am a student of the human experience, particularly as the individual adapts to cultural and technological changes. I learned to be myself, take risks, make mistakes, and forgive myself when I made them (while I tried not to repeat them). I hope you will understand why I care about you and your journey.

Understanding Your Authentic Self

As we interact with different people, we wear different masks. We don't behave the same with our grandparents as we do with our friends. We are respectful with elders and goofy with our buddies. The problem arises when we get to the workplace and generational expectations affect our daily lives, careers, money, self-acceptance, etc. For many of us, our career journey takes up most of our time, especially in our twenties and thirties, so "faking" or hiding who we are for so long can become problematic.

Each of us brings something powerful to the world. So, our main job is to believe in and belong to ourselves.¹² This is a tall order, as we have been brainwashed into thinking that if we don't become the standard version of whatever some authority envisions us to be, then we are "less than." If we can block their opinion of us, we can find our way to our authentic selves, particularly as we find our way in the world of work.

As authentic humans searching for meaningful work, we need to recognize and appreciate ourselves exactly as we are. Of course, we still need to change, learn, and improve, but we reconcile ourselves to the fact that we are whole, special, and have something important to give to the world.

Every human being embodies dignity. Each has awe-inspiring traits— bodies, souls, spirits, and senses. The glory of being able to move and sing and laugh! We can taste ice cream and love a child.

Strength and power come from self-acceptance and ego-less self-appreciation and compassion. Confidence is derived from an honest understanding of our strengths and weaknesses and a willingness to continuously learn and grow.

Maybe you're thinking, *all that sounds great, but I don't feel*

confident when I am staring into the face of a boss or someone else who judges me harshly. Here's my truth: even today, I sometimes feel self-conscious, confined, lost, confused, and like a phony. The rest of the time, this is my self-talk:

- ❖ I'm good.
- ❖ I can do this.
- ❖ I deserve all that is good.
- ❖ I know how to be in the world.

My goal is to make my actions and feelings congruous. That is, I am the same person no matter where I am. I am respectful to my elders and goofy with my friends at home, but when I'm at work, I am that same person. I don't hide who I am. I don't pretend to be smarter or dumber. I humbly offer my talents to the organization, contribute, and learn. I don't let someone else's thoughts about me affect my behavior. What they think of me isn't my business. Sure, my contribution certainly is the business of my employer. But my employer and coworkers don't get to define me and my work. If you are able to hold yourself in the esteem you deserve, or if you are working on doing that, you are on the right road.

For today, when you have moments of doubt, will you please accept that, to me, you are unique and important? I've never met you, but I know if I did, I would recognize how uniquely wonderful you are. How precious you are. I hope you agree that there's no one else like you in the world.

Finding meaningful work is about knowing who we are, what we value, and what we have to offer. Finding and accepting our authentic selves is the beating heart of the journey to meaningful work. My desire is to support you on this journey by offering not advice but tools to help you find work that satisfies your financial and emotional well-being.



Make a list of your unique qualities.

You may be wondering: *How do I know what makes me unique?*

Think about what your friends, family, teachers, coworkers, etc., say about you. Consider yourself from their perspective.

Think about people you admire. What unique qualities do they possess?

When you review their list and compare it to yours, you'll find you have more in common than you think.

Make sure there are at least ten things on your list. Some will be specific just to you. It's OK if some are qualities that all humans have, like senses. The ability to smell and to taste—these are not ordinary but powerful. I hope we learn to appreciate them, not take them for granted.

Think about what you love, no judgments. What do you love so much that when you do it, time means nothing? Maybe it's appreciating music or coloring. We're not looking necessarily for big things—we're looking for the things that make you, you.

“This isn’t an advice book; it’s a *Huh, I never thought of it that way* book.”

Do any of these statements feel true for you?

- Finding a job can be relatively easy, but finding a job I feel happy in is tough.
- I don’t seem to fit into any career box.
- My family wants me to go (or go back) to college but I’m not sure if I should.
- When I think about finding a new job, I feel overwhelmed or stuck.
- My last boss was terrible. I want to avoid a situation like that again.



If you checked any of these boxes, then this book is for you. Complete with case studies and exercises, *An Authentic Human’s Guide to Finding Meaningful Work* is here to help you find your own unique path forward. Since no one else has the same upbringing, values, experience, talents, hopes, and dreams, this guide won’t tell you what you “should” do, but instead encourage you to look at your options deeply and differently.

We can all find work that feeds not just our bodies but our souls—and that includes you. This book will help open your mind to new strategies and possibilities.



Deborah Mourey has been a file clerk, a consultant, a waitress, a teacher, a nanny, a librarian, and much more. She’s worked in corporations, non-profits, and for the government and had her own business. Some of these jobs held no meaning for her and others did, but none did more than her current journey supporting seekers—people who want something more from their work, something better. She lives and works happily from the Pacific Northwest with her terrier, the trees, and the mountains.