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Bravo, Todd Henry!" —DAVID ALLEN, author of GETTING THINGS DONE

DIE

UNLEASH YOUR BEST WORK EVERY DAY

EMPTY

TODD HENRY

author of THE ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

***For my father, Mike Henry,
for showing me how to take risks;
for my friend Brian Tome,
for showing me how to bend my life
around a mission.***

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

How much work did you do today that you will be proud of tomorrow? I don't mean just how you handled the big things, but also how you addressed the little, seemingly insignificant ones. Did you make progress on what matters most to you, or did you allow the buzz, busyness, and expectations of others to squelch your passion and focus?

I've been asking these questions of others and myself each day for more than a decade, and they are the main reason I originally felt compelled to write *Die Empty*. Through my work I've encountered many teams of brilliant, sharp, amazing, talented people who have at some point "settled in" or begun coasting on past success. Unfortunately, this often leads to deep regrets. It's not that these people aren't getting things done; perhaps they are even succeeding in the marketplace. It's that in "settling in" they are ignoring the small hunches, ideas, and bits of intuition that could lead to something truly remarkable. For this reason, many of us have had to sacrifice long-term greatness on the altar of short-term efficiency. We have stopped unleashing our best work each day.

Unleashing your best work means ensuring that your daily mix of work includes the important work that you *should* be doing for yourself (but may have been ignoring) in addition to the work that you *must* do as a function of your job.

Your best work may include choosing to have the difficult conversations you've been deferring, setting aside time to invest in future results rather than just focusing on immediate outcomes, and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone in order to learn a new skill or sharpen your thinking. In short, it means choosing not to defer your contribution, but instead working with urgency and diligence each day as you make progress on building a body of work that represents your real values, hopes, and ambitions. It's about putting your focus, assets, time, and energy into the work that matters most. Your *best* work.

I have learned that there are no clear rules for success, but I believe there is enough evidence to make this claim: a person who intentionally structures

work and life around what matters most to them will find a greater degree of gratification and will ultimately produce better results than those who don't. Unfortunately, our culture often doesn't provide for this kind of fulfillment. We spend more time trying to find easy roads to success or comparing our career paths to those of others rather than striving to maximize our contribution in our own areas of influence. It's clear that a significant share of the energy expended by employees is spent playing politics or clamoring for the next promotion. Many have lowered their sights from working toward the long-term goals of their organization to the short-term gratification they might be able to achieve as individuals. Even those who came in bright-eyed and optimistic have become worn by short-term thinking and eventually settle into the fold.

The good news is that we all have the ability to shun mediocrity and can instead live and work by design. If you refuse to settle, then there has never been a more opportune time for you to build a remarkable body of work. The current marketplace might have job uncertainty, but the upside is that it's now necessary to take your career into your own hands. You can no longer count on your company, your manager, or your industry to define your next steps. Instead, you must stay diligent and alert and plot your own course. Opportunity abounds for those who are willing to step into the heart of uncertainty, find their voice, and commit themselves to battles worth fighting. Now more than ever, we are each accountable for plotting our own path.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." I believe that the most gratifying life you can live is one that's committed to ideals that go beyond your own comfort and enjoyment. This doesn't mean living a life of martyrdom or always shunning pleasure. Rather, it means that to build a remarkable body of work you must commit to doing the right thing even when it's uncomfortable and to emptying yourself every day rather than deferring action. Since *Die Empty* was published, I've received countless e-mails from artists, managers, entrepreneurs, writers, and others expressing that they have adopted the ideal of emptying themselves and acting on what matters most each day. My wish for you is that you will muster the same courage and take action today on the things that you've been holding back. Unleash your best work, and refuse to take it to the grave with you. Choose to die empty.



1

Die Empty

*Alas for those that never sing,
But die with all their music in them.*

—OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, *THE VOICELESS*

In February 2011, the artist, designer, and urban planner Candy Chang transformed an abandoned home in her New Orleans neighborhood into a living work of art. She had recently lost someone she cared for deeply, and was reflecting on the meaning of life and what truly mattered to her. She was curious to know if other people had similar thoughts about living with a sense of urgency and purpose so she created an enormous chalkboard running the height and width of one side of the abandoned home. She then stenciled the words “Before I Die . . .” at the top of the wall, and created dozens of spaces with the words “Before I die, I want to _____” in grids across the surface. Chang provided the chalk needed to fill in the blanks, and waited in anticipation to see what would happen. Would people participate? Would it be vandalized? Would anyone even notice?

She didn’t have to wonder for long. The installation was an immediate hit, as neighborhood residents and passersby filled it with their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Some of the contributions were impersonal and matter of fact, and some were deeply personal:

“Before I die I want to . . . sing for millions.”

“Before I die I want to . . . write a book.”

“Before I die I want to . . . understand.”

“Before I die I want to . . . tell my mother I love her.”

“Before I die I want to . . . be someone’s cavalry.”

Word quickly spread, and visitors began showing up from throughout the region to inscribe their dreams and creative aspirations on the wall. It wasn't long before others were inquiring about creating installations in their own communities. At present, there have been more than one hundred "Before I die . . ." installations in cities across the globe, and Chang and her collaborators have developed a tool kit and detailed instructions for spreading the movement.

Why did Chang's project take off quickly and become so widely covered by international media? I believe it's because the "Before I Die . . ." wall resonates with what we both know and fear to be true: we have only a certain amount of time available to us, and how we choose to spend our days is significant. We're also aware that there are things we would like to do and experiences we would like to have before we die, many of which are desires we've suppressed for months or even years. We feel the ticking of the clock, and the accompanying sense that we may be missing our opportunity to make a contribution to the world. However, we often ignore these impulses as a result of the relentless pragmatics of life and work.

Your days are finite. One day, they will run out. As a friend of mine likes to say, "You know, the death rate *is* hovering right around one hundred percent." Many people I know spend their entire life trying to avoid this fact. They fill their lives with frantic activity, bouncing from task to task, and no matter how successfully they perform in their work, as they close up shop for the day they are left with the question "Did the work I did today really matter?" Others I've met are incredibly successful at, vested in, and highly compensated for their work, but over time they've grown stagnant. They sense they have something more to give, but they can't quite put their finger on why they're stuck in first gear. They have a nagging suspicion that they are capable of contributing more—maybe even being truly brilliant at *something*—but have no road map for unlocking what that contribution might be.

This begs the obvious question: How do you set in motion a course of action that will allow you to unleash your best, most valuable work while you still can? The marketplace is filled with (often simplistic and unhelpful) platitudes about living a life of fulfillment, landing your dream job, and discovering your purpose, but when you are in the midst of the fray it can feel futile to think about anything other than hitting your deadlines and chasing the next promotion. It's easy to get lost, and wake up many years later in a strange land asking yourself, "Who am I, how did I get here, and how do I go back?"

The only way to avoid this scenario is to instill consistent practices into your life that keep you on a true and steady course. An ounce of preventative discipline today is worth a pound of corrective action later. This book is about cultivating the mind-set and the methods you need to unleash your best work each day, and to increase the odds that, at the end of your life, you will not regret how you spent your days.

Don't Die Full of Your Best Work

In my first book, *The Accidental Creative*, I recounted a meeting in which a friend asked a strange and unexpected question: “What do you think is the most valuable land in the world?”

Several people threw out guesses, such as Manhattan, the oil fields of the Middle East, and the gold mines of South Africa, before our friend indicated that we were way off track. He paused for a moment, and said, “You’re all wrong. The most valuable land in the world is the graveyard. In the graveyard are buried all of the unwritten novels, never-launched businesses, unreconciled relationships, and all of the other things that people thought, ‘I’ll get around to that tomorrow.’ One day, however, their tomorrows ran out.”

That day I went back to my office and I wrote down two words in my notebook and on the wall of my office that have been my primary operating ethic for the last several years: Die Empty. I want to know that if I lay my head down tonight and don’t wake up tomorrow, I have emptied myself of whatever creativity is lingering inside, with minimal regrets about how I spent my focus, time, and energy. This doesn’t happen by accident; it takes intentional and sustained effort. But I can say with confidence from my own experience and the experiences of others I’ve worked with that the effort is well worth it.

You’ve probably heard “No one ever lay on their deathbed wishing for another day of work.” I think this saying is wrong, and perhaps a little dangerous because of what it implies. First, I believe a great many people do regret not having treated their life with more purpose, and would give anything to have one more chance to approach it with the kind of intention and conviction that imminent death makes palpable. They know that they consistently ignored small twinges of intuition, inspiration, and insight. They recall how they cowered away from risk in favor of comfort. They spent their days regretting their past decisions rather than taking aggressive steps to redirect their life in a more hopeful direction.

Second, this saying presupposes that work is an inherently miserable act that people engage in against their will, or that it’s something that necessarily pulls us away from the people and activities we really care about. But work encompasses much more than just how we make a living. Any value we create that requires us to spend our time, focus, and energy—whether in the context of occupation, relationships, or parenting—is *work*. Humans, it seems, are wired to find satisfaction by adding value through toil. Thus, for centuries work has been a deeply ingrained part of our identity and our understanding of our place in the world. I believe that the more you apply self-knowledge to how you engage your labor, the more satisfaction you will find in the very act of work, and thus the more joy you will find in life.

If there is one overriding goal of this book it is this: to bring a newfound clarity and sense of urgency to how you approach your work on a daily basis, and over your lifetime. I hope to help you lock onto a focused understanding of what’s really important and help you make a commitment to chase after it with gusto rather than simply settling in for the ride.

A Confession

I've struggled to write this book, and in full disclosure, I realize I've got some things working against me. Here's the honest truth: no one really wants to think about death, let alone adopt it as some kind of motivational slogan. In fact, my colleagues and I often laugh as we imagine the words "Die Empty" inscribed on a giant banner behind me as I take the stage at a conference. It's not exactly the kind of feel-good, warm and fuzzy sentiment that large public gatherings are typically designed to cultivate. It would be much safer (and perhaps more lucrative) for me to stay squarely in my lane and continue to write about innovation or collaboration.

And still, I can't *not* write this book. As I've shared this message with thousands of people over the past few years, I've received countless e-mails from around the world about how it's changed their life perspective and challenged them to approach their work with more urgency. At the same time, I continue to encounter professionals every day who are abandoning their contribution and forfeiting their best work because they're stuck or deceived into believing that the path they are on will eventually become more bearable. It pains me to think about their unfulfilled potential while knowing that implementing a few simple, daily practices to eliminate areas of ineffectiveness could set them on the right path. Thus, in writing this book I'm taking my own advice to not leave inside me the work I care about the most.

What Die Empty *Doesn't* Mean

The phrase "die empty" could easily be misunderstood to mean spending every ounce of yourself on your career. I can imagine a sinister, evil-mustached boss manipulating employees with a motivational poster containing the words "DIE EMPTY!" in an attempt to squeeze a little more effort out of the team. This, friends, could not be further from what I hope this book will accomplish.

It's not about getting everything done today

Karōshi is a Japanese term that means "death from overwork." In the past several decades, it has become more common in Japanese culture, which in the years since World War II has heavily emphasized the importance of work productivity over all other aspects of life. Many high-ranking executives have died in the prime of life for no apparent reason other than the ill effects of overwork. To be clear, this is not what I mean by "die empty." It's not about ignoring all areas of your life so that you can exclusively focus on getting work done. In fact, working frantically is actually counterproductive in many cases. Emptying yourself of your best work isn't just about checking off tasks on your to-do list; it's about making steady, critical progress each day on the projects that matter, in all areas of life. Embracing work with this mind-set will not only increase your chances of tackling your goals, but will also make it all more gratifying.

It's not the same as “live like there's no tomorrow”

Opportunity is always accompanied by its twin sibling: responsibility. Today you have a chance to make a difference through your work, but you must also be mindful of how today's actions will affect tomorrow's outcomes, and how your work impacts the lives of others. You must be conscious of how today's choices beget tomorrow's regrets.

It's not about following your whims

You have a responsibility to leverage your passions, skills, and experiences to make a contribution to the world. You also need to make sure that you are delivering on your expectations and honoring the people who are paying you to produce results. The most frustrating part of work for many people is the tug-of-war between making a contribution you believe in and honoring the expectations of your manager or client, even if it means doing work you are less proud of. But as you'll see throughout the book, the tension between these two forces can often be remedied with a subtle shift in mind-set, which will also lead to more satisfaction, and, ultimately, better work.

What *Die Empty* Does Mean

Throughout the rest of this book we will be operating by a set of core beliefs that underlie the practices and principles you'll learn along the way. These beliefs will help you be more purposeful in how you approach your work.

Your days are numbered—finite—someday they will run out

This is indisputable. We live with the stubborn illusion that we will always have tomorrow to do today's work. It's a lie. We need to live with a sense of urgency about the work we do today. It matters not just because an opportunity lost today is an opportunity lost forever, but because the way that we engage in our work ultimately affects the way that we engage in our life as a whole. As you grow in your capacity to engage in your work, and as you discipline yourself to make continuous growth a part of your daily approach, you will find that latent capacities arise in every area of your life. Don't waste the opportunity.

You have a unique contribution to make to the world

This is not self-help mumbo jumbo; it's the truth. It's easier to dismiss this notion than to own up to it and do something about it. You possess a one-of-a-

kind combination of passions, skills, and experiences; there is something you bring to your work that no one else could. If you relinquish that power, then it will never see the light of day and you will always wonder “what if?” The price of regret is incalculable.

No one else can make your contribution for you

Waiting for permission to act is the easy way out. Everyone has to play the hand they’re dealt. This means that you can’t make a habit of pointing fingers, blaming others, or complaining. As painful as it can be, unfairness is baked into every aspect of life, and to make a contribution and empty yourself of your potential, you have to come to terms with it and refuse to be a victim.

Your contribution is not about you

You cannot function solely out of a desire to be recognized for what you do. You *may* be rewarded with accolades and riches for your work. You may also labor in obscurity doing brilliant work your entire life. More likely, you’ll fall somewhere in the middle. There is an overemphasis on celebrity and recognition in our culture, and it will eventually be the death of us. Cultivating a love of the process is the key to making a lasting contribution.

Avoid comfort—it is dangerous

If making a significant impact was easy, it would be commonplace. It’s not common because there are many forces that lead to stagnancy and mediocrity. For example, some people, whether co-workers, managers, or even friends, may not want you to fully engage in the pursuit of great work because it places an onus on them to do the same. If you begin to rise above the pack, they will quickly try to bring you back to earth. Also, organizations often make it easy to settle in, providing you with a good salary, a nice title, or a sense of stability—the proverbial “golden handcuffs.” It’s easy to fall in love with these comfortable perks, but the love of comfort is often the enemy of greatness. There’s nothing wrong with experiencing comfort as a by-product of your labor, but you can’t make it your chief goal. Greatness emerges when you consistently choose to do what’s right, even when it’s uncomfortable.

Take a stand—don’t shape-shift

You are better positioned to make a contribution if you align your work around your values. Don’t be a mirror, passively reflecting the priorities of others. You must dig through the rubble to the core principles that guide your life, come hell or high water. Then commit to engaging your work with a clean conscience, knowing that you are holding true to those principles. There

is plenty of room to experiment and try new things, but if you don't stand for what you believe in, you will eventually lose yourself in your work.

Your understanding of your “sweet spot” develops over time like film in a darkroom

In baseball, there is a place on the bat called the “sweet spot,” the best part with which to strike the ball. It will send the ball soaring a lot farther than if you hit it even a few fractions of an inch off the mark with the same effort. Similarly, you have a “sweet spot” in your life by which you will add the most unique value through your efforts.

Too many people want to come out of the gate with a clear understanding of their life's mission. There is no *one* thing that you are wired to do, and there are many ways you can add value to the world, while operating in your sweet spot. However, these opportunities will only become clear over time as you act. They will develop slowly like film in a darkroom, giving you clues as you experiment, fail, and succeed. You have to try different things, and devote yourself to developing your skills and intuition, before you will begin to see noticeable patterns and understand your unique value. Patience is required. This is a long-arc game, but it must begin now.

You must plant seeds today for a harvest later

What you plant today you reap tomorrow, or further down the road. You must structure your life around daily progress based on what matters to you, building practices and activities that allow you to plant new seeds each day, with the knowledge that you will eventually see the fruits of your labor.

While the universal principles outlined above are not overtly expressed in the remainder of the book, you will find that they inform many of the specific practices you will learn. In the end, my hope is that you will embrace the importance of *now*, and refuse to allow the lull of comfort, fear, familiarity, and ego to prevent you from taking action on your ambitions.

How to Read This Book

Die Empty is divided into three sections. The first three chapters discuss the nature of contribution, why work matters, and why so many brilliant, skilled people end up settling for less than they're capable of. Chapters 4 through 10 share specific principles that will help you cultivate the mind-set and methods to unleash your best work. The final two chapters offer strategies for applying these principles in your daily life, and using them to uncover a deeper sense of cohesion and purpose.

While the entire book is intended to be practical and immediately implementable, there may be some chapters that resonate more than others. If this is the case for you, I'd recommend spending extra time with these

chapters and doing the exercises and questions contained therein before continuing with the rest of the book. Doing this may provide an extra measure of clarity as you consider other, less pressing issues. There are also suggestions for sharing the ideas in this book with people you know and work with. I'd encourage you to do so, as one of the best ways to internalize a concept is to teach it to others.

A final word of caution: the following chapters don't contain quick fixes or shot-in-the-arm tactics designed to make you look on the bright side of life. (Of course, in picking up a book titled *Die Empty* I suspect you probably weren't expecting lollipops and rainbows.) While I believe that a positive outlook is critical to maintaining traction, no one is served by false promises of effortless bliss.

Rather, my goal is to tell it to you as straight as I know how. I believe you're capable of more, and that your best work is still ahead of you. However, all the positive thinking in the world will not amount to anything without decisive action. The rest of us need you to act, because if you don't, you're robbing yourself, your peers, your family, your organization, and the world of a contribution that only you can make.

The cost of inaction is vast. Don't go to your grave with your best work inside you. Choose to die empty.



2

Your Contribution

The average man does not know what to do with his life, yet wants another one which will last forever.

—ANATOLE FRANCE

Principle: Your body of work should reflect what's important to you.

How much of your day do you spend doing work that you'll be proud of later?

In his commencement address to the Stanford University class of 2005, the late Apple co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs exhorted graduates with this:

“I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: ‘If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?’ And whenever the answer has been ‘No’ for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.”

He continued, “Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to

lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

The most common response that I’ve encountered when sharing these words with others is an immediate “YES!” followed by a numb look of “Now what?” The notion of blazing a path into the unknown is exciting, but it can also lead to a kind of “purpose paralysis” (fear of getting it wrong) or worse, frustration when the daily grind of work doesn’t seem to reward your pursuit of those flashes of inspiration. It seems like fine advice for someone with no obligations, limitations, or baggage, but not for people living in the real world with grown-up responsibilities such as a family and a mortgage.

However, engaging in deeply gratifying work does not require you to check out of life, pack your bags, and head off on a pilgrimage to India. It simply requires consistent, focused efforts to cultivate your instincts and skills, and make measured progress on your goals. Brilliant work is forged by those who consistently approach their days with urgency and diligence. Urgency means leveraging your finite resources (focus, assets, time, energy) in a meaningful and productive way. Diligence means sharpening your skills and conducting your work in a manner that you won’t regret later. When you adopt the mind-set of urgent diligence, you’ll pour all of who you are into your days, and subsequently you’ll find that the unique value you bring to the world comes more clearly into focus.

Just having a job is, in many cases, a luxury in today’s economic climate. The nature of the work and the degree to which it fulfills a desire to engage in something meaningful is of secondary concern for many, and understandably so. You might be asking yourself: Isn’t it selfish to think about things like personal fulfillment and being in your “sweet spot” when there are so many people scrambling just to find employment?

Absolutely not! The great problems we see in the world today will not be solved by people functioning at half capacity, cranking out work they don’t care about in order to buy more things that will eventually rust or rot. These problems will be solved by people who have tapped into their deeper aptitudes and who are pouring themselves fully into work that’s meaningful to them and valuable to others. Unfortunately, despite the often expressed desire to engage in great work, it seems that many people already sense that they are operating at less than their full ability.

A 2012 study sponsored by Adobe and conducted by the research firm StrategyONE interviewed five thousand adults, a thousand each from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Japan, about their perceptions of creativity and creative engagement. The study revealed that while there is an increasing expectation across all sectors for both creativity and productivity, in many workplaces creativity is frequently subverted due to the increasing pressure to get work done. Globally, only one in four people reported that they feel they are living up to their creative potential.

What this sampling reveals is that when we have to choose between doing work we’re proud of and just getting the job done, many of us feel compelled to do the latter. We know there’s always more work just over the horizon, ready to wash over us like a tsunami. We have to settle for what’s practical over pursuing what’s possible so that we can live to fight another day. Thus, we save ourselves for tomorrow. But over time, approaching work this way corrodes our sense of purpose and our will to excel. We end up with far too

many unexecuted ideas kicking around the back of our minds, and we eventually feel overwhelmed and stuck. We know that we're capable of more.

The truth is there's no deep, dark secret to unleashing your best work and finding your sweet spot. Though not easy, it begins with the decision to build practices that help you scan your life for areas where you might be growing stagnant, and to help you pour more of who you are into your work. Your legacy is built one decision at a time.

Your Body of Work

When you're gone, your work will stand as the single biggest testament to who you were and what you believed. By "your work," I don't just mean your occupation, but any way in which you contribute value to the world using your available resources. This, of course, includes every task you do and project you engage in, but also every time you encourage someone else or contribute to a relationship, every instance in which you make an effort to grow your skills or develop your mind, or every time you go the extra mile even though you are exhausted. Your body of work comprises the sum total of where you choose to place your limited focus, assets, time, and energy. For the purpose of this book, I will define work as any instance where you make an effort to create value where it didn't previously exist.

Naturally, your worth as a person transcends the value you create, but your work is the most visible expression of your priorities. As you consider your current body of work and the sum of the value you've created, is it reflective of what you truly care about? Forget about your title, pay grade, or how the world would rate your relative success or failure compared with what's considered "normal." I've found that the only way to effectively gauge my work is to answer the question *Can I lay my head down tonight satisfied with the work I did today?*

This exact question is posted prominently on my computer monitor, where I see it daily. I wrote it in a moment of frustration about a year and a half ago, when I was at the end of a long season, having just published my first book and wrapped up an extended period of travel. I found myself in a strange land, having just achieved a lifelong goal, but facing the uncertainty on the other side. For so long, my energy had been devoted to the pressures of doing my "regular work" while writing and launching the book in every spare moment, but like a rubber band stretched beyond its elasticity, I simply couldn't return to normal. While I was getting a lot of work done—I still had a business to run, after all—without the singular focus and clarity that the book launch brought, I felt like I was pushing a wall forward but making little meaningful progress. Worse, my family began to feel the effects too. When I was struggling to make meaningful progress at the office, the lack of traction infiltrated my home in the form of a short temper, emotional retreat, and a lack of follow-through on important family matters.

Empty space wants to be filled, and where there is an absence of purposeful activity and meaningful progress, any activity that brings the ping of immediate productivity will fill the void. With a lack of clear purpose to drive your work, efficiency often supplants effectiveness, and it's possible to

move ever faster without any sense of direction. “Pointless efficiency” perfectly describes my state during my post-book-launch haze. I was working hard, and getting a lot done, but I felt as though I wasn’t really checking the most important items off my list, let alone questioning myself about what *should* be on the list instead of busywork. A bit ironically, it’s the same position I’d helped countless others escape, yet here I was slipping on the same patch of ice I’d seen a thousand times.

Even small amounts of success can be the harbinger of complacency—or worse, paralysis—because every milestone you reach ushers in new uncertainty. Where to now? What are the next logical steps? Does this work still matter, or is it time to change course? Because we are biologically hardwired to form habits around rewarding activity, when we accomplish a goal or taste the sweet fruit of success, it’s tempting to keep pushing the same levers over and over again. However, this approach is often a fast track to mediocrity. The key to long-term success is a willingness to disrupt your own comfort for the sake of continued growth. To that end, how you choose to stare down uncertainty is often the determinant of success or failure. You can either operate by design, meaning that you put specific measures in place to keep you energized, self-aware, and operating at full capacity, or you operate by default, doing what seems comfortable or easy in the moment until your next steps become more clear. (Hint: they won’t.)

In the scenario described above, I was falling prey to one of the most common pitfalls of creative work. In order to feel that I was making progress, I was throwing myself deeply into execution without considering how I was approaching my work, whether I was even headed in the right direction, and if I was using the proper tools. I was leveraging one kind of work but ignoring the other two altogether.

The Three Kinds of Work

Work is core to the human experience. We seem to be wired to derive a sense of purpose from adding the smallest amount of value through our efforts. In his classic book *Working*, in which he gives firsthand accounts of the lifestyles of dozens of workers in diverse occupations, Studs Terkel wrote, “In all instances, there is felt more than a slight ache. In all instances, there dangles the impertinent question: Ought not there be an increment, earned though not yet received, from one’s daily work—an acknowledgement of man’s *being*?” Work is a reinforcement of that sense of being—of our sense of *belonging*—and a way to discover ourselves as we interact with the world around us.

Even though work sometimes feels like one massive, melded blend of tasks, conversations, and meetings, it can be parsed into three different forms: Mapping, Making, and Meshing. To truly unleash your full capability, and to ultimately find your sweet spot of contribution, you must engage in all three.

Mapping is fairly straightforward. It’s planning, plotting your objectives, and setting priorities. It’s the “work before the work” that helps you ensure you’re spending your focus, time, and energy in the right places. You often map instinctually, as when you make a list of tasks to accomplish, or block off

time on the calendar. Sometimes mapping is also done in collaboration with others, such as in strategy meetings or planning sessions.

However, not all the mapping you need to do is instinctual and obvious. It's not all about critical paths and Gantt charts. Some mapping deals with less tangible aspects of work, such as the values that drive you or your sense of why you do what you do. When you fail to account for these in your mapping, it's easy to lose your focus and quickly get off course. You can wind up making really great progress in the wrong direction. In later chapters, you will learn how ignoring these less obvious forms of mapping can cause you to go astray, and some practices you can implement to keep you on your desired course.

Making is actually *doing* the work. It's creating value of any kind, including executing tasks, making sales calls, designing, writing, engaging with your direct reports, and tackling your objectives. Making is what typically comes to mind when you think of work, because it is what you're doing when you deliver the most tangible value. You can strategize all you want, but in the end, you have to do something about your plans. While it's often difficult to measure in the moment how effectively you plan or strategize (Mapping), you *can* count at the end of the day how many tasks you checked off a list, how many words you wrote, or how many calls you made. As a result, it's easy to gravitate toward Making at the expense of the other two kinds of work because you're able to point at something and say "I did that!" As mentioned above, this can result in making quick, but ultimately useless, progress.

Because Making is the most tactical of the three kinds of work, it's also the area where it's easiest to get distracted. There are more moving parts and decisions with immediate impact, and thus there are more opportunities for things to go awry. As such, you must have some guiding principles to help you stay aligned and on task, which we'll discuss in later chapters.

The final kind of work, **Meshing**, is often overlooked because it is rarely tied directly to results. You don't get paid for it, and it doesn't show up on anyone's organizational priority matrix. However, it's often the most important determinant of long-term success and getting the best work out of yourself and your team. Meshing involves all of the "work between the work" that actually makes you effective. It's composed of activities that stretch and grow you, such as acquiring and developing new skills, reinforcing or enhancing your knowledge, cultivating your curiosity, or generating a better understanding of the context for your work. It's also composed of critical disciplines such as paying attention to the adjacent spaces in your industry and engaging in activities that may not have an immediate payoff, but position you to be more effective in the coming days.

In the hustle of daily life, it's easy to overlook Meshing and focus mostly on Mapping and Making, largely because they provide a more immediate payoff. However, you ignore Meshing at your peril, because your diligence about engaging in behavior that has a longer-arc payoff often correlates directly with your long-term success. Continued, disciplined growth prevents stasis.

You need to be purposeful about engaging in all three types of work. This won't happen by default, only by design. All of us have a tendency to

playing a gig in an obscure bar in a run-down part of town, and was quickly put to work recording his first album. The executives were certain that he was destined to be the next Bob Dylan, and that his music was so transcendent it would garner an immediate audience and launch him into international superstardom. Unfortunately, despite some critical acclaim, his debut album sold few copies, and his follow-up album did worse. Despite all the hype, it seemed that Rodriguez was destined for obscurity.

A few years later, as the story goes, a woman visited South Africa to see her boyfriend and happened to bring along a Rodriguez record. Her boyfriend loved the record, and made a copy to share with friends. Copies passed from peer to peer, the buzz built, and Rodriguez rapidly became a cult icon among the youth of apartheid-burdened South Africa. As one man put it, "He was the soundtrack of our lives." His music was as pervasive in the average liberal South African home as that of the Beatles and Simon and Garfunkel. As his fame grew, so did his album sales. Unfortunately for Rodriguez, his record label had folded shortly before this surge of international recognition (he was also big in Australia), and he was completely unaware that he was gaining an audience for his music halfway around the world. Additionally, a legend had emerged in South Africa, which was information starved due to the isolationist regime, that Rodriguez had committed suicide onstage during a concert many years prior. Because of this story, no one bothered to seek him out to see if he was still making music.

While his fame grew half a world away, Rodriguez had returned to working for a demolition company. He lived in a modest home in downtown Detroit, returned to school to get a degree in philosophy, and lived an unassuming existence. That all changed in the early 1990s, when a South African music journalist, Stephen Segerman, was charged with helping write the liner notes for the first release of a Rodriguez CD. Segerman decided to investigate further to see if he could verify some of the legends about his musical hero. He made several phone calls to the United States, and after much persistence was able to contact some of the people involved with the original Rodriguez album projects. To his surprise and bewilderment, Segerman learned that Rodriguez was not only still alive, but that he had not made any new music in decades since his first few albums had supposedly been a commercial disaster. Segerman and his investigative partner Craig Bartholomew created a website dedicated to finding Rodriguez, and eventually uncovered his whereabouts when Rodriguez's daughter responded to one of their inquiries. They chatted with Rodriguez by phone, and invited him to South Africa to perform a series of concerts for his fans.

When they arrived in South Africa in March of 1998, Rodriguez and his daughters expected to be greeted by a few dozen fans excited to hear his music. Instead, his first concert could barely contain the enthusiasm of over five thousand people who packed the venue, singing along with every word of his decades-old songs. The initial concert was followed by several more sold-out shows, each at the same level of intensity as the first. In total, Rodriguez performed for tens of thousands of adoring fans in South Africa before returning to the United States and resuming his life as a demolition worker. His legend and career have since grown, and a 2012 film titled *Searching for Sugar Man* documented the surreal quest to find Rodriguez, and subsequently

won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Rodriguez spent well over two decades of his life believing that his music had been a commercial failure. He moved on, often working tough jobs in grueling conditions, but always with a mind-set of craftsmanship and artistry. (In the film, his former foreman describes how Rodriguez would arrive at the job site wearing a fancy suit, as if he were headed to a job at a bank, to do work that many people would find demeaning.) Yet half a world away, his music was becoming the soundtrack of a generation of young South Africans.

You don't always know the full impact of your work. In fact, you may not even get to experience the full effect of your work in your lifetime. For every story like that of Rodriguez, there are countless others where the tireless, diligent work of an individual is not recognized. It's highly unlikely that you will ever be pulled onstage in front of thousands of adoring fans.

But consider this: What if this recognition had never been received by Rodriguez? Would that have in any way diminished the quality of his work or its impact?

You are building a body of work today through both *what* you do and *how* you do it. Whether or not your body of work is recognized for its true value is beyond your control. Regardless, the contribution you make will be accomplished through the use of all three kinds of work (Making, Mapping, Meshing). The degree to which your contribution reflects your true potential will be largely determined by how disciplined you are about improving your self-awareness and skills every day.

Beware of stumbling blocks that stand in the way of contribution. There are sticking points that even the most gifted and disciplined person can fall prey to. In the next chapter, we'll address why mediocrity is so seductive and why so many people unwittingly choose it over a life of dedication to excellence.