Tom Rath is an unassuming guy. A self-proclaimed introvert, he’s soft-spoken and lives a quiet life, choosing to spend his free time with a book at home or chasing after his two small children. If you met him, he’d never volunteer that Fortune 500 leaders look to him as one of the greatest thinkers of his generation.

He certainly wouldn’t tell you he’s achieved his status while fighting a cancer-causing genetic disorder.

Rath, 37, is a senior scientist and adviser at Gallup and the author or coauthor of five books about ways people and organizations can reach their potential. Combined, they’ve sold more than 5 million copies. Rath is also one of the masterminds behind StrengthsFinder, a tool similar to the Myers-Briggs test that has been used by more than 8 million people to identify their talents.

His books are full of statistics about behavior: Unemployment appears to be the only major life event—including the death of a spouse—from which people don’t fully recover within five years. Bad bosses may increase the risk of stroke by 33 percent. Marriages that have a 5-to-1 ratio of positive-to-negative interactions are significantly more likely to succeed.
Rath’s most recent book, *Well Being: The Five Essential Elements*, explores the interconnected areas of life that contribute to wellness. Asked which realm Washingtonians need to improve on the most, he becomes slightly uneasy. “Washington is not a city that takes great pride in being a healthy place necessarily,” he says before adding, “Now, I have no data. That’s just my own observation.”

He appears visibly uncomfortable making assertions without a binder of research to back them up. Ninety-nine percent of the time, he says, he can attribute his statements to cold, hard facts.

**RATH IS UNLIKE ANY OTHER VOICE** trying to influence corporate America. He isn’t a spotlight-seeker like Donald Trump or a “big ideas” guru like the now-disgraced Jonah Lehrer. He simply puts forth the best information he can find.

“Gallup’s data is so damn good you can take it to the bank,” says business consultant and George Mason University professor Steve Gladis, who uses Gallup’s work and Rath’s books to coach corporate clients on improving their business and employee engagement.

Rath has access to the vast resources of Gallup. The organization is most often associated with polling data, but its work extends beyond that. It has scientists in 160 countries interviewing locals and studying their environments. In places such as Afghanistan where much of the population doesn’t have phones or computers, researchers go door to door.

In his office in DC’s Penn Quarter and at his Arlington home, Rath has written his books by sifting through information gleaned by Gallup’s on-the-ground scientists, searching for the most relevant themes to help people improve their lives and workplaces. For instance, *Well Being*—written with colleague Jim Harter and based on research in more than 150 countries—uses science as a foundation for explaining what makes life worthwhile and how to improve people’s situations.

One study in the book involved 168 workers. Researchers collected saliva samples throughout the day to gauge fluctuations in stress hormones and monitored the subjects’ heart rates. The conclusion was that those who identified themselves as engaged in their work were happier and less stressed out. Not exactly shocking, but here’s the point: The assertion that people who love their jobs are happier becomes more than just a truism.

**RATH DIDN’T WRITE HIS BOOKS PRIMARILY TO MAKE MONEY.** Because he relied on Gallup’s research and all were published by Gallup Press, the work is owned by his employer. As he explains it, it’s part of his job as a Gallup researcher to publish books.

However, he’s currently on a sabbatical writing his sixth book, tentatively titled *Eat Move Sleep*, and this one is entirely his own. He researched it himself and will publish it independently from Gallup. He began the project last August and says it will likely be out by next October.

The book explores the small decisions about fitness and diet that can add up to long-term differences. It’s inspired by Rath’s own battle with von Hippel–Lindau syndrome, a rare genetic disorder that causes cancerous growths. Rath—whose specific mutation affects one in 4.4 million people—was diagnosed at age 16 after tumors caused loss of vision in his left eye.

Until recently, he was reluctant to announce his struggles: “I pride myself on doing fine without having to share that. I haven’t wanted that to be part of my professional identity.” But last year, three friends died—two from cancer, one from heart disease. Rath had spent decades researching the choices likely to prolong his own life, such as focusing on the ratio of carbohydrates to proteins in foods rather than worrying only about calories. Suddenly, he was guilt-stricken for not having shared that research: “It started to eat away at me.”

Deciding that a drastic change was in order, Rath left his full-time role at Gallup to concentrate on *Eat Move Sleep*. He also realized that, to some extent, his health is unpredictable. If he’s ever told he has only a few months left, he wants to spend that time with his wife, Ashley—a reading specialist—and his kids, ages two and four, not rushing to finish a book.

He has had tumors in his kidneys, adrenal glands, pancreas, spine, even his brain. He has undergone chemotherapy as well as surgery to treat eye and kidney tumors. Every six months, he spends a week at the National Institutes of Health undergoing scans and blood tests. He says as long as he manages his condition and the doctors stay on top of catching tumors before they metastasize, he has high hopes of a normal life span.

Still, he adds, “I’m a researcher, so I’m realistic that there’s nothing I’m doing that’s going to prevent me from getting cancer in the future. But I can slow it down.”

And he hopes his book will help others.

**RATH’S LIFE HAS DEPENDED ON HIS AFFINITY FOR RESEARCH BECAUSE THE DOCTORS IN HIS HOMETOWN OF Lincoln, Nebraska, didn’t know how to treat his illness.** “They’d never heard of my condition,” he says.

As a high-schooler, Rath investigated medical institutions that might help him. Eventually, he found Johns Hopkins, where an eye doctor was able to treat him.

Growing up, Rath was surrounded by educators and spent a lot of time with his maternal grandparents. His grandfather, psychologist Donald Clifton—who was the American Psychological Association deemed “the father of strengths-based psychology and the grandfather of positive psychology”—became chairman of Gallup in 1988. His grandmother, Clifton’s wife, was one of Rath’s grade-school teachers, and he credits her with his passion for reading.

“She read to me constantly,” he says. “When I was in kindergarten, I entered a competition and read 52 books in a week.”

To this day, his goal is to get through an entire book every week—and he often succeeds. He reads almost exclusively nonfiction: economics, health, technology, social sciences.

Rath displayed business sense early. By age eight, he had set up a snack-vending operation, called Biz Kids, which he ran out of an empty closet at the Lincoln headquarters of his grandfather’s company, Selection Research, which later acquired Gallup.

One thing he wasn’t interested in was writing—he never would have guessed he’d end up as an author.

Rath’s prose style is conversational. He uses familiar examples and prides himself on getting a point across succinctly. In *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, he describes why—contrary to the American belief...
that kids can grow up to do anything they want—people are better off focusing on natural talents:

“The reality is that a person who has always struggled with numbers is unlikely to be a great accountant or statistician. And the person without much natural empathy will never be able to comfort an agitated customer. . . . Even the legendary Michael Jordan, who embodied the power of raw talent on a basketball court, could not become, well, the ‘Michael Jordan’ of golf or baseball, no matter how hard he tried.”

He got undergraduate and master’s degrees in psychology from the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania. After college, he had multiple job offers but chose to work at Gallup with his grandfather. Four years later, Donald Clifton was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Rath cherishes the time he got to spend working alongside him.

RATH HAS BEEN AT GALLUP MORE THAN 13 years. Until his sabbatical, he was global-practice leader of the workplace-consulting arm, responsible for heading research into leadership as well as employee engagement, development, and well-being. In the past decade, more than 25 million people in many of the world’s largest companies have participated in the employee-engagement programs developed by Gallup. The programs are based on 12 questions that corporations have their employees answer. From the responses, Gallup’s consultants can tailor an organization’s structure and its hiring and training programs to maximize output and employee happiness.

Rath’s sabbatical began in August, and he expects to get back to Gallup this spring or summer. But he’s not sure he’ll return to his full-time role; he may stick to his current outside-adviser position, keeping his office at the DC headquarters and continuing to help the largest clients—banks, retailers, health-care firms—while reserving time for personal projects.

He started his career in 1998 with the technology group. At the time, the company was conducting in-depth assessments of everyone from truck drivers to executives in order to determine their natural talents. The work was led by Clifton, who had studied people’s strengths for 40 years.

The Internet was gaining steam, and Gallup wanted to put the work online in a personal-strengths assessment that people could do from their computers. Rath became IT manager of what he says was just “a little application” called StrengthsFinder.

The tool presents pairs of statements and asks users to rank how strongly they agree with each—for instance, “I get to know people individually” versus “I accept many types of people.” Today the assessment is a cornerstone of Gallup’s work and the basis of Rath’s books StrengthsFinder 2.0 and Strengths Based Leadership.

Gallup’s research shows that people who double-down on their skills, rather than focus on improving weaknesses, are happier and more successful. Similarly, the best leaders are those who capitalize on natural talents instead of striving to be well rounded.

Though it was his grandfather who launched Gallup’s research into strengths decades ago, Rath’s colleagues credit him with propelling the work forward.

“Tom will never lay claim to hugely significant achievements on his own,” says Barry Conchie, a leadership consultant at the organization and one of Rath’s coauthors, “yet he’s been a driving force on our science having to do with strengths.”

WHEN RATH FOUND OUT IN 2002 THAT his grandfather had cancer, he did what came naturally—poured himself into researching every way to fix the situation. Together, Rath and Clifton explored top medical facilities, much as Rath had done for himself. He spent nearly all of his time at his grandfather’s side, filling notebooks with information on how to beat stomach cancer.

Remembering that Clifton had once remarked that people tended to say wonderful things about others once they died but neglected to celebrate them while they were living, Rath was inspired to write his grandfather a ten-page letter thanking Clifton for all he’d done to influence his development and career.

His grandfather was moved and told Rath something the younger man had never heard: “I think you’ve got some talent for writing.” Then he asked Rath to help him write a book.

Clifton had always talked about his “dipper and bucket” theory—meaning that people fill each other up or dip from each other’s “buckets” depending on positive or negative interactions. He wanted to write a book to show how even fleeting exchanges can have a meaningful impact—and wanted to finish it in two months.

“That was the only time he’d ever said anything that led me to believe he didn’t know if he’d live that long,” says Rath, who often stayed up through the night to complete the project. “I learned to write while being held over the fire. I wouldn’t have been comfortable sharing my words with people on paper if it wasn’t such an extraordinary circumstance.”

They finished the first draft of How Full Is Your Bucket?—which would become a bestseller and the start of Rath’s success as an author—the day before Clifton died in 2003.

Though his grandfather remains a legend at Gallup, Rath has begun building his own legacy. Nonetheless, when asked what he hopes people take away from his work, he harks back to the dipper and bucket.

“To greatly oversimplify it,” he says, “moments matter. So be a little more conscious of the way you’re speaking to the people you care about and the strangers you interact with. Those moments shape your life.”

Staff writer Marisa M. Kashino can be reached at mkashino@washingtonian.com.