



What's the **Point?**

Turning **Purpose** Into
Your Daily **Superpower**

Tom Rath

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To Harper and Everett,
who put the *why* in every day.



Contents

Introduction. What's the Point? — Your Daily Wake-Up Call 1

Part I: Building an Other-Directed Life 7

1. Why Passion Is Overrated 9

2. Your Childhood Dreams Are Anchors, Not Wings 19

3. Superpowers You Fail to See 29

4. The Search for Happiness is a Decoy 39

5. Aim Your Strengths Outward 47

6. When Gaining Status Sinks Careers 55

7. Never Go With the Flow 67

8. The Myth of *Enough*. 79

Part II: Making Purpose Plural 89

9. The One-Purpose Delusion 91

10. Craft the Job You Want 101

11. From Spectator to Creator 111

12. Break Your Digital Chains 121

13. Search for Shoulders to Stand On 129

14. Avoid The Certainty Trap. 137

Part III: Leaving a Lasting Impact..... 147

15. Build a Better Body of Work 149

16. The Trillion-Dollar Coach Who Never Took Credit..... 155

17. Invest in People, Not Titles 163

18. Time-Hacking for Impact 171

19. Goodbye, Martyr Syndrome..... 181

20. Death: The Ultimate Motivator 191

21. Engineering Your Immortality..... 199

Epilogue: Planting Seeds for a Harvest You'll Never See 205

Part IV: The Purpose Profiles..... 213

Acknowledgments..... 315

References..... 317

About the Author 346

● INTRODUCTION

What's the Point? Your Daily Wake-Up Call



**Most people never uncover
their **greatest potential**.**

This book exists to prevent that tragedy. You need to uncover your hidden superpowers — starting now. But that will take some work and questioning of *what* you do and *why* you do it today.

For some perspective: I'm writing to you on borrowed time. At 15, doctors told me a genetic cancer syndrome was likely to kill me by 40. That diagnosis should have destroyed me. Instead, it gave me something most people never get: clarity about what matters. Not in some abstract, philosophical way, but in the urgent, practical sense of someone whose clock is visibly ticking.

I did what anyone would do with a death sentence: I got busy living. I poured everything into my twenties and thirties, building a family, creating, working like hell. When my grandfather was

dying of cancer, together we wrote a book called *How Full Is Your Bucket?* That book, along with *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, pulled me into a world of business books and corporate speaking. I achieved success by any traditional measure, checking all the boxes society told me mattered.

Then I turned 40 — the age I wasn't supposed to reach. And standing in that moment, I had a brutal realization: I'd spent decades living someone else's definition of success. Every milestone, every achievement, was based on what I was *supposed* to do. What others expected. Not what mattered.

That's when the question hit me: *What's the point?*

Not as philosophy. Not as some existential crisis. But as a daily compass. What's the point of this meeting? This project? This career path I'm sleepwalking through?

The truth I discovered cut deep. Most of what I'd learned, assumed, and even taught others was bullshit. Polite lies we tell ourselves to avoid the harder questions. Not the kind of tough questions I'd ask a struggling friend over drinks. And not the kind of life I'd choose if social expectations vanished.

My previous books were safe, research-heavy, buttoned up, and academic. This one isn't. This is me, unfiltered, sharing what I wish someone had told me at 22, or 32, or yesterday. Because here's what I know with absolute certainty: you're wasting most of your day. Not because you're lazy, but because you've never asked the right question. You're so busy being busy that you've forgotten to ask *why*. You're optimizing your schedule while your life leaks away, hour by hour, in meetings that don't matter and tasks that won't be remembered next week, let alone next year.

When people hear the word *purpose*, they panic. They imagine some grand quest, a lifetime mission statement, pressure to find their One True Calling. That's exactly backward, and it's why so many

people feel lost. Purpose isn't some mountain to climb or treasure to find. It's fuel for today, right now, at this moment.

The word has been hijacked by influencers and life coaches selling you anxiety, but the reality is much simpler: purpose is just knowing why you're doing what you're doing today and being willing to change course when the answer is "I don't know" or worse, "because I'm supposed to."

Each day, you wake up to roughly 16 hours of consciousness: 960 minutes, 57,600 seconds. Yet most of us spend exactly zero of those seconds asking, "What's the point?" We just react, respond, follow the schedule, check the boxes, and then wonder why Monday morning feels like a funeral. We're dying in installments, one meaningless day at a time, and we don't even realize it because everyone around us is doing the same thing.

I don't know when my borrowed time will run out. Could be tomorrow, could be a few decades, but that uncertainty has become my greatest teacher. I'm done pretending that someday I'll get around to what matters, done waiting for the perfect moment, done following rules written by people who are already dead.

This book isn't about finding your passion. That's a luxury most can't afford. It's not about quitting your job to follow your dreams. That's Instagram fantasy. It's about something far more radical: paying attention to your actual life, the one you're living right now, and having the courage to ask *why*.

Here's my challenge: stop waiting for your wake-up call. Most people need a heart attack, a divorce, or a terminal diagnosis to start asking the right questions, but you don't have to wait for tragedy to strike. You can start today, right now, with whatever you're doing next.

Ask yourself: What's the point? If you can't answer, or if the answer makes you sick, it's time to change. Not someday, but today.

Because while you're reading this, debating whether to take this seriously, your life is happening. The clock is running, and unlike me, you don't know when your overtime starts.

The question isn't whether you have enough time. It's whether you're done wasting it. And that's a decision you can make right now, in this moment, before you turn the page.



A Necessary Warning

I'm not a guru, not a coach, not a formally trained expert on these topics. I'm a guy who got handed a death sentence at 15 and decided to pay attention. That made me a lifelong student of what works, what doesn't, and why we keep doing things that make us miserable even when we know better.

What follows isn't prescriptive — it's provocative. These aren't rules to follow but matches to light. Some ideas will burn bright for you, while others won't catch at all, and that's exactly how it should be. Take what works and leave what doesn't, but here's the thing: if something makes you uncomfortable, lean into that discomfort. The ideas that challenge you might be the ones you need most. Our resistance often points to our deepest fears and our greatest potential for growth.

I'm not here to make you feel better about your choices. I'm here to help you make better ones, starting now. This book will challenge everything you think you know about work, success, and what makes a life worth living. It will ask you to burn down what isn't working, and to build something that matters. If you're ready for that kind of honesty, if you're done with polite lies and ready for some uncomfortable truths, let's begin.





● P A R T I

Building an Other-Directed Life

Why Passion Is Overrated



“**W**hat’s your passion?” The career counselor waited, pen poised over her yellow legal pad, while I sat there at 22 years old with one eye lost to cancer and a life-altering genetic condition. This well-meaning woman thought this question would guide me toward a meaningful future. My classmates had decades to “find themselves,” but I had maybe 20 years if I was lucky, and she wanted to talk about passion.

Here’s what nobody tells you about passion: it’s a luxury item, a first-world problem dressed up as universal wisdom, and it’s killing careers before they even start. Think about what “follow your passion” assumes. First, that you have some pre-existing passion just waiting to be discovered, which most people don’t. Second, that this passion will remain constant throughout your life, which it won’t. And third, that passion automatically translates to fulfillment, which it almost never does. Passion is cotton candy — sweet, enticing, and gone the moment reality hits.

People who believe they should “find their passion” also operate on the false premise that our interests are fixed rather than developed

over time. Approaching our passions with a fixed mindset makes it more likely that they will abandon ship when inevitable challenges arise. They expect passion to carry them through difficult times, but passion typically vanishes precisely when the work gets hard.

A fixed mindset about our work leads to stagnation. A growth mindset, on the other hand — the belief that we can develop and improve our abilities over time — leads to contribution. And contribution is what creates meaning.

The Passion Mirage

Want to know what truly predicts success? It's not passion; it's purpose. Researchers tracked 4,660 people for nine years and discovered something that should reshape how we think about work: those with a strong sense of purpose didn't just feel better; they earned significantly more money. Not because they were chasing wealth, but because purpose drives performance in ways passion never could. We've got the entire equation backward. We think money leads to meaning, that success creates satisfaction, that passion produces purpose. We're wrong on all counts.

I've interviewed successful professionals across every field imaginable: lawyers, doctors, CEOs, artists, teachers, entrepreneurs. Know how many attributed their success to following their passion? One. Just one out of hundreds. The others told a completely different story. They found something that needed doing, got good at it, and discovered meaning through contribution. Fulfillment followed competence, and purpose emerged from practice. You don't find your purpose wandering through some mystical journey of self-discovery. You build it, brick by brick, through the daily act of making things better for other people.

Following Your Contribution

My friend Jason's story illustrates the way contribution can transform a career. For 25 years, Jason excelled in technology, product management, sales, and leadership. On paper, he was thriving. Except he felt dead inside, going through the motions in a life that looked successful but felt empty.

Then his son Max got into an elite early childhood program in Austin, Texas, one of those places that mostly serves at-risk kids but keeps a few spots for parents who can pay full freight. Jason started hanging around, watching how the teachers worked with kids who'd been dealt the worst possible hands. Something about the work, about the directness of the impact, captivated him. One day, he asked the executive director a simple question: "How can I help?" She put him on the board, and suddenly Jason found himself caring more about these Tuesday night board meetings than his actual job.

When the executive director announced her retirement, she pulled Jason aside. "You should apply for my job," she said. Jason thought she was insane — he sold software, not hope. But she saw something he didn't. Jason took the job, along with a major pay cut, and agreed to run the nonprofit. His friends thought he'd lost his mind, his financial advisor had a panic attack, and his parents asked if he was having a midlife crisis.

Within three years, Jason doubled the school's funding and transformed it into Texas's premier program for at-risk youth. But here's what really matters: he wasn't following some long-held passion for education. He'd never dreamed of working with children or running a nonprofit. What changed everything was simple: he could see the faces.

In tech, Jason tracked dashboards, quotas, quarterly earnings, all abstractions removed from human impact. At the school, he watched a four-year-old who'd been sleeping in cars learn to read. He saw a single

mom break down crying when her daughter got into college, first in the family. Along the way, his organization helped single parents get into trade schools, created a food pantry for those in need, offered counseling, and even provided direct financial support during the pandemic.

“My sense of purpose,” Jason told me, “was in the relationships with the entire families. Every day, I interacted with three generations — kids, parents, grandparents. I saw how my decisions rippled through their lives. That’s what made it matter.”

Jason didn’t follow his passion. He followed contribution, and meaning followed him. His story confirms what research consistently shows: when you connect your daily efforts to their impact on others’ lives, fulfillment isn’t just possible — it’s inevitable.

You’re Not Lost; You’re Looking in the Wrong Place

The “follow your passion” cult hasn’t just failed to deliver on its promises. It’s created an entire generation of anxious, paralyzed professionals constantly wondering if they’re in the wrong place. Every career move becomes an existential crisis, every bad day feels like proof you’re on the wrong path, and every colleague who seems happier makes you question everything. Meanwhile, telling someone living paycheck to paycheck to “follow their passion” isn’t just unhelpful. It’s insulting. It’s Marie Antoinette telling peasants to eat cake.

The fundamental problem with passion is that it’s selfish. It asks, “What do *I* want?” Purpose is generous. It asks, “What does the *world* need?” When we place our own interests at the center of our career decisions, we miss the profound connection that comes from seeing how our efforts improve other lives. Stop asking what you’re passionate about, and start asking who you can help. That shift changes everything.

If you're just punching a clock, waiting for 5 p.m., living for the weekend, you're not only wasting time; you're wasting your life in eight-hour increments. The world doesn't need another zombie shuffling through meetings. It needs people who give a damn, who show up to make things better, not just to make a living.

What You Do vs. Who You Help

The word “work” itself is broken. It implies drudgery, obligation, something you do for someone else in exchange for money to buy your real life. We need a revolution in our perspective on what we do all day, and it starts with changing the question from “What do you do?” to “Who do you help?”

At a conference several years ago, I found myself in the predictable networking ritual we've all endured. A woman approached me with a standard opener: “So, what do you do?” I gave my standard pitch about being Global Practice Leader, my job at the time. She looked unimpressed. “That tells me your title. I'm asking, “What do you *do* during the day that helps people?”

I stood there, taken aback. In that moment, I realized how hollow my professional identity sounded. And not just sounded, but also how hollow it had become. I defined myself by my role, not by my impact on others. Having that mindset wasn't just limiting my potential. It was fundamentally missing the point of work itself.

Look at the language we use to talk about work: we “go to work,” we “do our job,” we “earn a living.” These phrases position work as something distinctly separate from the rest of our lives. Something we endure rather than embrace. This language creates a toxic split between your “work self” and your “real self,” between what you do for money and what really matters.

Most people get stuck in the “work to live” rut because that’s the script society hands us. But here’s the kicker: when you let your identity get hijacked by your job title or bank balance, you’re not just killing your motivation. You’re eroding your self-worth, from the inside out.

The Résumé Obituary

When was the last time you updated your résumé? Look at it now. What do you see? A dry collection of job titles, responsibilities, and accomplishments that could describe almost anyone in your field? I’m guessing there’s not much unique about you there.

The typical résumé reads like an obituary written by someone who didn’t know the deceased. “Here lies Matt, who managed a team of seven and increased quarterly sales by 12%.” Is that how you want to be remembered? Is that really who you are?

Even worse, most professional bios follow the same soulless template: education, career progression, current role, and a token mention of family or hobbies if there’s space. These documents tell us nothing about what makes a person’s contribution unique or meaningful to others. I find this approach to professional identity fundamentally backward. It positions you as a collection of skills and experiences to be consumed by employers, rather than as a unique individual who can improve other people’s lives.

The Faces You’re Ignoring

If you follow this new line of thinking, the basic idea is to use your unique skills to make more meaningful contributions to efforts that improve other people’s lives. Right now, you take a series of actions every day that (eventually) result in improving people’s lives. Yet most

people do a poor job of connecting their daily work with its impact on something bigger than themselves.

Start by asking a different question: “Who do I help?” Not what do I do, not where do I work, not what’s my title — but “*Who* benefits explicitly from my efforts?” The answer might surprise you. A software developer doesn’t just write code. He creates tools that help people connect, create, or solve problems. The grocery clerk ensures families have access to the food they need, and the law enforcement officer protects and secures her community.

New research upends the old-school playbook: to get motivated, you must see *why* your work matters. When you see how your daily grind impacts real lives, you bring more energy, creativity, and grit. Across a wide range of professions, studies show that seeing and hearing from the people we help leads to better outcomes for everyone. When you connect your work to a purpose bigger than yourself, you don’t just survive the workweek. You *crush* it.

This isn’t just semantics. It’s a fundamental shift in how you view your work. When you focus on whom you help rather than what you do, you connect with the actual purpose of your efforts. This connection creates meaning, which is far more critical to long-term satisfaction than achievement or advancement.

We do such a bad job of matching our efforts with the world’s needs that we only use a fraction of our capacity today. The solution? Reconnecting with the people we help. Studies show that when you see the direct impact of your work on others, motivation and performance skyrocket.

Don’t Wait for Permission

Here’s the hard truth: Nobody will hand you a sense of purpose on a silver platter. Most organizations are too busy chasing quarterly

numbers to care about your personal growth. That's on you. If you want more than a paycheck, you must rewrite the rules. Start by asking the question: Who benefits from my work, and how can I make that impact bigger?

Don't just settle for job satisfaction; demand significance. If your job description is killing your spirit, find the thread that connects your daily tasks to someone else's better day. Make it your mission to leave every project, every team, and every customer better off than you found them. That's how you build a legacy, rather than just a résumé.

If you're slogging through your days at work, this isn't only about wasting your time; you're shrinking your self-image. And you are selling yourself and the world short. Life is about building meaningful connections with people, and acknowledging the meaning in those connections is your fuel for performance.

Meaning is manufactured in the lab of our daily choices. Each time you help someone. Every time you connect your work to its impact on others, you create meaning. It's not something that *happens* to you; it is something that you build decision by decision, interaction by interaction. This is why purpose, for many people, is the ultimate daily superpower.



The Point.

CHAPTER 1

Passion is unreliable and self-centered. Purpose — knowing who you help and why it matters — drives real fulfillment and success. **Stop chasing what you love, and start building what the world needs.**

Try This.

This week, identify three activities where your skills **directly help others** (not just “doing your job” but solving real problems). Ask two people who benefit: “How does this specifically help you?”

By Friday, block two hours next week for each activity, **making them priorities** rather than afterthoughts.