

You Don't Find Your Purpose — You Build It

by John Coleman

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“How do I find my purpose?”

Ever since Daniel Gulati, Oliver Segovia, and I published *Passion & Purpose* six years ago, I've received hundreds of questions — from younger and older people alike — about purpose. We're all looking for purpose. Most of us feel that we've never found it, we've lost it, or in some way we're

falling short.

But in the midst of all this angst, I think we're also suffering from what I see as fundamental misconceptions about purpose – neatly encapsulated by the question I receive most frequently: “How do I find my purpose?” Challenging these misconceptions could help us all develop a more rounded vision of purpose.

Misconception #1: Purpose is only a thing you find.

On social media, I often see an inspiring quotation attributed to Mark Twain: “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” It neatly articulates what I'll call the “Hollywood version” of purpose. Like Neo in *The Matrix* or Rey in *Star Wars*, we're all just moving through life waiting until fate delivers a higher calling to us.

Make no mistake: That can happen, at least in some form. I recently saw Scott Harrison of Charity Water speak, and in many ways his story was about how he found a higher purpose after a period of wandering. But I think it's rarer than most people think. For the average 20-year-old in college or 40-year-old in an unfulfilling job, searching for the silver bullet to give life meaning is more likely to end in frustration than fulfillment.

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In achieving professional purpose, most of us have to focus as much on *making* our work meaningful as in *taking* meaning from it. Put differently, purpose is a thing you build, not a thing you find. Almost any work can possess remarkable purpose. School bus drivers bear enormous responsibility – caring for and keeping safe dozens of children – and are an essential part of assuring our children receive the education they need and deserve. Nurses play an essential role not simply in treating people's medical conditions but also in guiding them through some of life's most difficult times. Cashiers can be a friendly, uplifting interaction in someone's day –

often desperately needed – or a forgettable or regrettable one. But in each of these instances, purpose is often primarily derived from focusing on what’s so meaningful and purposeful about the job and on doing it in such a way that that meaning is enhanced and takes center stage. Sure, some jobs more naturally lend themselves to senses of meaning, but many require at least some deliberate effort to invest them with the purpose we seek.

Misconception #2: Purpose is a single thing.

The second misconception I often hear is that purpose can be articulated as a single thing. Some people genuinely do seem to have an overwhelming purpose in their lives. Mother Teresa lived her life to serve the poor. Samuel Johnson poured every part of himself into his writing. Marie Curie devoted her energy to her work.

And yet even these luminaries had other sources of purpose in their lives. Mother Teresa served the poor as part of what she believed was a higher calling. Curie, the Nobel prize-winning scientist, was also a devoted wife and mother (she wrote a biography of her husband Pierre, and one of her daughters, Irene, won her own Nobel prize). And Johnson, beyond his writing, was known to be a great humanitarian in his community, often caring personally for the poor.

Most of us will have multiple sources of purpose in our lives. For me, I find purpose in my children, my marriage, my faith, my writing, my work, and my community. For almost everyone, there’s no one thing we can find. It’s not *purpose* but *purposes* we are looking for – the multiple sources of meaning that help us find value in our work and lives. Professional commitments are only one component of this meaning, and often our work isn’t central to our purpose but a means to helping others, including our families and communities. Acknowledging these multiple sources of purpose takes the pressure off of finding a single thing to give our lives meaning.

Misconception #3: Purpose is stable over time.

It’s common now for people to have multiple careers in their lifetimes. I know one individual, for example, who recently left a successful private equity career to found a startup. I know two more who recently left business careers to run for elective office. And whether or not we switch professional commitments, most of us will experience personal phases in which our sources of meaning change – childhood, young adulthood, parenthood, and empty-nesting, to name a few.

This evolution in our sources of purpose isn't flaky or demonstrative of a lack of commitment, but natural and good. Just as we all find meaning in multiple places, the sources of that meaning can and do change over time. My focus and sense of purpose at 20 was dramatically different in many ways than it is now, and the same could be said of almost anyone you meet.

How do you find your purpose? That's the wrong question to ask. We should be looking to endow everything we do with purpose, to allow for the multiple sources of meaning that will naturally develop in our lives, and to be comfortable with those changing over time. Unpacking what we mean by "purpose" can allow us to better understand its presence and role in our lives.

John Coleman is a coauthor of the book, *Passion & Purpose: Stories from the Best and Brightest Young Business Leaders*. Follow him on Twitter at @johnwcoleman.

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