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Directional Living

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'I'm blown away. This book only looks like a well-behaved self-help book. In fact, it's radical – nearly anarchic. Lucid, practical, effective and beautiful, *Directional Living* upends all the common wisdom about ambition, struggle and building a good life. Try it, and transform'
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Publishers Weekly

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan Hellerer is a career coach and the founder of Coaching for Underfulfilled Overachievers. She has led hundreds of people, including Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to transform their lives by transforming their careers. After checking all the traditional boxes of success – graduating at the top of her class from Stanford University and spending eight years as a Google executive – and still being deeply unhappy, she quit her great-on-paper job with no plan. Now her mission is to provide others with the support and guidance that she needed when she herself was struggling. Megan has been featured in *New York Magazine*, *Vogue*, the *Wall Street Journal*, CNBC and *The Times*. She lives with her husband and daughter in the Hudson Valley, New York.

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DIRECTIONAL LIVING

A Transformational Guide to Fulfillment in Work and Life

Megan Hellerer



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Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in the United States of America by Penguin Life,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2024
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Life 2024
001

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–51337–8

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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To me at 29,

For having been desperate enough, and brave enough,
to abandon everything you thought you knew—
about yourself and about the world.

Here's the guidance you were looking for and couldn't find.

To all Underfulfilled Overachievers everywhere,

You're not alone, it's not your fault, and
you don't have to live like this.

There is another way and it's closer and
more attainable than you may think.

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Unless a full name is used, the client vignettes in this book are composites of composites and not meant to be an accurate reporting of events that occurred. While they are based on real-life experiences and actual interactions that I have had—that is to say, they are not exaggerated—the details have been materially changed to protect the privacy of my clients. My objective was to represent the essence of the personal evolution and to stay true to the spirit of the human, the work, and the relationship in each story, not to portray anything else.

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The Underfulfilled Overachiever

I was somewhere no one ever wants to be: on the floor of a public restroom. It was the middle of a Tuesday at Google's New York office, and I had just fled a team meeting to throw up. I didn't care about how disgusting it was to be lying on the bathroom floor. I didn't care about anything anymore. Shaking and dry heaving, I gripped the sides of the toilet. I tried to count my breaths but kept losing track.

What is happening to me?!

I'd heard about a calming technique in which you methodically try to engage all five of your senses. It had always sounded to me like some woo-woo bullshit, but that was before I got desperate. This wasn't my first panic attack—far from it—but it was the first time that one had happened at work. It was the first time I couldn't manage to smile and nod my way through it.

Okay, Megan. Five things you see.

I'd turned off the fluorescent bathroom light and was lying mostly in the dark, except for the strip of light coming in from under the door, which was just enough for me to make out the Google logo on my laptop.

Strip of light—super, that's one! Google logo—two.

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The toilet passed for number three. The color Ballet Slippers on my manicured nails, bitten down to the quick, became number four. And the poster advertising that week's "happy"-hour concert took spot number five. How was I going to fake my "school spirit" for yet another office social event? Christ, how was I going to make it all the way to Friday?

"I can't do this anymore," I said out loud between sobs.

Get it together. Keep going. Four things you can touch.

Mascara-streaked wad of toilet paper. Puddle of tears on the tile floor. Google employee badge. The designer "luck" charm hanging from my necklace. Willing to try anything to fix my unhappiness, including jewelry, I'd splurged on it with money from my last bonus. As of yet, clearly, it wasn't helping.

"I really, really tried. I tried so hard," I whispered, aloud again, to no one at all. "How did I get here?"

Here . . . Hearing, right. Three things you can hear.

My heart beating alarmingly fast. The painful wails I couldn't believe were coming out of my own body. The whir of Googlers whizzing down the hallway on company scooters right outside the bathroom door. (Yes, it was common practice to ride scooters in between meetings for maximum transport efficiency.)

"I'm so sorry," I blurted. Who was I even apologizing to? My job? Everyone I thought I was letting down? Myself?

Almost done. Two things you can smell.

Vomit. (Gross.) Cheap bathroom air freshener. (Oh my God, maybe grosser.)

"I am so fucked."

One thing you can taste.

My afternoon latte, for the second time. Yep, definitely going to throw up again.

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How Did I Get Here?

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you're even reading this from your very own proverbial bathroom floor. (Why is it always a bathroom floor?!) Or maybe you're just flirting with your floor, wherever that might be, and trying to stave off the feeling that it's inevitably where things are headed. Perhaps, like me, you can't understand where things went wrong. I'd done all the "right" things. I'd checked all the boxes and worked so, so hard to get where I was. I'd taken all AP classes and gotten straight As at a top-ranked high school in New York City. I'd been the captain of the varsity soccer and softball teams and president of the athletic association. I'd won the scholar-athlete award. I'd been chosen as a peer mentor to younger students. I'd organized an annual fundraiser for research for a cure for cystic fibrosis. I'd invested in meaningful friendships and even had a kind-hearted boyfriend.

☑ *Exceptional, well-rounded student.*

I had applied to fourteen colleges and universities because I didn't know how to decide. (Difficulty making decisions was a theme of mine.) I was accepted into many of them. I chose Stanford.

☑ *Go to the "right" college.*

In Palo Alto, I finally felt like I could let up a little. And by "let up," I mean limiting my all-nighters to once a week and graduating with a 3.9 GPA. I had a place staked out in the basement of the library and frequented it so much that I referred to it as "my" spot.

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The library coffee baristas knew my name and my near lethally caffeinated order by heart. I fantasized about being a creative writing major but diligently discarded that vision as impractical—what would it "get" me? So I pursued an interdisciplinary international relations major instead. I spent my summers hostel-hopping solo through Europe, interning for *NBC Nightly News*, and reporting for Greenwich Village's free neighborhood newspaper, *The Village Voice*. I studied abroad for a semester (Florence, of course). I lived in a place on campus called the "Enchanted Broccoli Forest." I fell in love. I took a computer science class.

- ☑ Degree in something practical.
- ☑ A well-rounded college experience!

As my college graduation approached, I applied for a job at Google and was offered a position that paid more money than I ever imagined I'd make at twenty-two. I hadn't previously had even the slightest interest in tech and had only supremely basic coding skills, but I could get excited about the learning curve that came with being immersed in anything new. So despite desperately wanting to move back to my hometown of New York City, I started my new life on Google's "campus" in Mountain View, California, just days after graduation. Everyone seemed very impressed.

- ☑ Get the "good" job at the hot company with the salary and the health insurance and the matching 401(k).

I met a cute, smart fellow Stanford grad and Googler who became my boyfriend. This was convenient, as it meant we could multitask:

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quality time together on our commute and at the office during lunch dates in the free gourmet Google cafés!

- ☑ Power couple status.

Pretty soon I was traveling business class all over the country as a "strategic partner manager." I met with C-suite clients many years my senior and got promoted a bunch of times.

- ☑ Busy!
- ☑ Important!

I got peer recognition awards and MVP awards, as well as bonuses for going "above and beyond" and having exceptional impact on particular projects.

- ☑ Capable and likable teammate.
- ☑ Exceptional employee.

When the New York office opened, I got myself relocated and landed a great apartment on the street where Carrie lived in *Sex and the City*.

- ☑ Score a trendy West Village apartment.
- ☑ Don a sleek, chic "corporate executive" wardrobe.
- ☑ Pretend sexism and misogyny are things of the past.
- ☑ Live up to your potential.
- ☑ Make it all look easy and effortless.

I had "made it." This was everything I'd worked so hard for, and my life looked like the epitome of success. I could tell by the way people's

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eyes lit up when someone introduced me. "This is Megan. She went to Stanford and works at Google." Just like that, I had their respect.

But my *self*-respect? Nonexistent.

How We Spend Our Days . . .

Back in that Google bathroom, when I finally ran out of tears, I crawled across the floor and pulled myself up onto the sink. I rinsed my mouth and rubbed hard at the lines of dried mascara running down my cheeks. I felt so pathetic. What I saw in the mirror was alarming. I'd suddenly and unintentionally lost twenty pounds over the previous few months and my Theory pencil skirt was hanging off of me. My eyes were hollow and empty and racoon-ish. "You're in serious trouble," I said to the haunted reflection in the mirror. "You are not okay. Look at you—you're dying."

When I reemerged from that bathroom, the team meeting had ended, and I did the only thing I could think of: I pretended nothing had happened. I told no one—not my boyfriend, not my best friend, not my sister, not my mentor, not the therapist I wasn't yet ready to find. This panic attack was only the most recent. There had also been the one on the corner of Fifteenth Street and Eighth Avenue at rush hour and the especially inconvenient one in the middle of a teeth cleaning at the dentist. There was the Saturday night spent hiding out on the fire escape at my friend's birthday party and the fetal-position-in-my-morning-shower anxiety waves, which had become so routine that I'd started setting my alarm fifteen minutes earlier to accommodate them.

I knew intuitively—with absolute, unwavering certainty—that this little "situation" had to be kept secret. I knew that something

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was deeply, unfixably wrong with me. *Look around,* I kept telling myself. *You have a coveted job at a company that's changing the world. You've already achieved every single goddamn thing you set out to. You are dripping with privilege. You have everything you could ever want or need. This is "success"! People are proud of you! You made it! If all this doesn't make you happy, then nothing will. How are you so ungrateful?! Why can't you just appreciate everything you have?! You must be broken.*

It wasn't just that I was miserable, unfulfilled, and so, so lost. I was ashamed. I hated myself for not being able to suck it up or figure it out and fix whatever was wrong with me. I absolutely could not let anyone know that I couldn't hack it in the tech world. It went against everything I believed about myself. How embarrassing that, despite being incredibly competent most of the time, I couldn't figure out what seemed like should be the simplest thing to determine: what the hell I was meant to do with my life. Everyone else seemed to know what to do with theirs.

The night after the bathroom-floor incident, I curled up in bed and tried, with the assistance of Kim Crawford Sauvignon Blanc, to process what had happened. Leaving my job felt like the only option. And at the same time, it didn't feel like a viable choice at all. Even just thinking about quitting made me feel like I would cease to exist. I could not fathom what "life after Google" might look like.

As irrational as it sounds, I've never felt, before or since, so viscerally, so physically, like I was dying. I can still summon the feeling when I close my eyes. It was like being on a plane in the worst possible turbulence. Your logical brain tells you it's fine. The pilot says it's fine. This is normal. It happens. It will pass. You know how rare plane crashes are. But your body, your nervous system, doesn't speak that language. It is convinced that this is The End, and it is

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panicking accordingly. I'd tried everything to make staying at Google palatable: switching roles, managers, cities; taking a sabbatical; doing less; doing more. And still, I ended up on the goddamn bathroom floor.

Annie Dillard famously wrote that "how we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." So, how was it that I was actually spending my days? I was nauseated on my way to work, numb all day at the office, and barely going through the motions of connection and engagement only to race home as soon as possible so that I could collapse behind closed doors. I'd spent a large portion of my twenties in this dire state: depressed, anxious, isolated in plain sight—terrified of the big, long life I still had before me. Was I prepared to spend the rest of my life like this? Because that's the life I was building. This thought tormented me.

There was no single moment when I consciously chose. My body made the choice for me when I could no longer physically compel myself to *go* to work. I was too prideful to break down publicly—how unprofessional! But after the bathroom incident, I knew that I was going to fall apart, and so I was going to do so by myself in the privacy of my own home, thank you very much. The actual conversation in which I quit my job consisted of my mumbling something to some newish junior HR person in California about not being able to do this anymore. And so it was that I packed up my desk, transitioned my accounts, and walked away from everything I thought I was supposed to want. I left with no plan and no idea what I was going to do with my life. I just knew it could not be this.

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The Not-That Experiment

In the movies, quitting your job is often portrayed as this triumphant moment of stick-it-to-the-man self-realization. Bridget Jones gets to tell her smarmy boss that she'd rather take a job wiping Saddam Hussein's ass. *The Devil Wears Prada*'s protagonist, Andy Sachs, gallantly throws her ringing cell phone into a fountain in Paris as her ruthless boss, Miranda Priestly, looks on aghast. But, for me, while it did feel like I'd spectacularly blown up my life, I did not go out in a blaze of glory or like a phoenix rising from the ashes. I did not ascend in rapture and bliss to an instantaneous state of joy and fulfillment as I'd expected. I'd long fantasized about ecstatically shouting the news of my newfound freedom from every roof deck in New York City. And a small part of me still wanted to do exactly that. But a much louder part of me was *terrified*: no more income, no more health insurance, no more 401(k). Almost immediately, I started imagining emailing my old boss and telling him I'd made a mistake. I even drafted several emails to this effect. *Just kidding! Take me back!*

The main problem was that my life did not cease to suck. It just sucked in new ways. I had removed my job from the equation, but the existential dread remained. I grew increasingly isolated, numb, and agoraphobic. Because every time I left the house, everyone was surely staring at me and my scarlet letter *F* for "failure." *There she goes, the one who squandered all her potential.* Or: *Look away, children. She's the one who had it all and still couldn't make it work.* Or: *Beware of the irresponsible, unemployed mess!* I felt exposed without the armor of an important-sounding title and the business cards sporting a Google logo. Who was I without my carefully cultivated five-year plan? I dreaded the "So, what are you going to do

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next?" question and avoided any social situation where I thought I might have to answer it. I was afraid of what it said about me that I "couldn't hack it." What if no one ever hired me again? What did I have to show for the last eight years? Did I even have any skills? I was deeply afraid that I was secretly lazy and that I'd never achieve anything ever again, let alone find something I cared about.

There were intense feelings of loss, too. I didn't understand how I could miss something that had made me so unhappy. What I didn't know then was that it wasn't the job itself I was mourning; it was a loss of identity, the death of my Google self. I needed to say goodbye to everything I thought I knew about myself and the world in order to move forward.

There was a small glimmer of freedom in this "failure." Yes, the thing I was most afraid of had happened: by my estimation, I'd failed at living the perfect, flawless life. I had to give up the charade; I couldn't fool anyone anymore. If I couldn't be perfect, then I might just have to be myself. And who the hell was that? I knew I needed to do something drastic to rewrite my default settings, to put some structure (I love structure!) around this transition and prevent my overwhelmed, anxiety-ridden, control-happy, perfectionist brain from sabotaging itself by seeking out the next shiny offer at the next biggest, could-be-a-unicorn start-up that came along just to assuage my fear.

The answer wasn't another career plan, though. Instead, I came up with something of an *anti*-career plan: a six-month experiment that, I reassured myself, I could easily ditch if it all went to shit. An "experiment" was an excellent container because it was a low-stakes way to commit to trying something new, where the goal was not to get it "right" but to test and learn. I had no idea what I was trying to do, but I did know what I was trying not to do. The mission of this experiment was simply *not that*, and so I called it the Not-That Experiment.

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The rules were simple. No résumé updates. No job applications. No interviews. To pay my bills, I sold my Google stock, which felt wildly irresponsible, but I told myself that I'd reevaluate my financial situation when the experiment was over. As for what I *would* do during these six months? I would choose to do only things that I liked to do and that reminded me of who I was.

This proved harder than expected.

One day, early in the experiment, I had a meltdown in the tissue aisle of CVS. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out which freaking tissue-box design I liked. And I needed to know what I liked, goddammit! (Yes, this really happened.) I knew the ones I was "supposed to" like, the one my interior designer friend would pick and the one that would match another friend's chic monochrome style, but I had no idea which one *I* liked. I was stunned that every point of reference I had for choosing what resonated with *me* was outside of me. It was so backward. I sat down in the middle of the aisle (there I was on a public floor again!), squeezed my eyes shut, and searched inside myself, frantically swiping left on every external opinion that popped into my mind. Eventually, I would have to get to my own actual personal preferences, right?! But I was paralyzed. If I couldn't pick a silly tissue box, how was I going to pick a career, a partner, a life that I loved? It was like I'd somehow erased myself from my own life. I left without tissues. I'd just use toilet paper. I was done filling my life with things that didn't feel like *mine*.

This is why much of the rote advice to soul-searchers falls flat. *Follow your heart. Do what you love*. Trust me, I gladly would have if I'd known what that was.

Staying in the experiment, doing the opposite of everything I felt inclined to do, was a struggle, but this is one place where my perfectionism saved me: I stuck it out because I didn't want to fail (again).

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What I was doing was "researching," though I didn't call it that at the time. I was looking for clues, from as many different perspectives and places as I could find, that would help me solve the great mystery of how to do this whole life thing more meaningfully.

So I went to museums and concerts, attended lectures at the 92nd Street Y, and took cooking classes and photography workshops. I participated in meditation retreats and recovery meetings. I learned about Ayurvedic doshas, and I worked on my adrenals and my serotonin with a naturopath. I stopped drinking. I read and watched and studied and listened to psychologists and sociologists, spiritual leaders, academics and researchers, coaches and inspirational speakers, memoirists, poets and artists, and entrepreneurs and founders, trying to understand how and when I had gotten so lost and how I might be found. Someone, somewhere, had to have a manual for how to do life "right," right? I took copious notes. Almost every book, interview, and article offered some nugget. I did *The Artist's Way* and morning pages. I got a therapist. I meditated daily. I purged my closets. And I wrote, a lot. Every day. I wrote down everything I was learning in assorted notebooks: what was maybe "working" and what wasn't.

All of it was kind of, sort of helping, and yet none of it felt like the full story. I was three months in, and I was still stuck and confused, still having panic attacks, still suffering through days when I just couldn't get out of bed. I was too far along to go back, but I still couldn't see a path forward. None of the resources out there seemed to help—like really, deeply help—therapy, psychology classes, Buddhism, energy healers, acupuncture, yoga, sleep, exercise, meditation, or medication . . . Where was the step-by-step guide, with an actionable plan and a checklist, to walk me through a career change? *Just tell me what to do and I'll do it!*

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Then one night I pushed myself out of my sweatpants and attended a cocktail party fundraiser for a friend's nonprofit organization. I knew what was coming and did it anyway. And when, exactly three minutes after I arrived, someone asked me what I did, I started to launch into my usual vague response, then suddenly stopped. I was too tired. I couldn't muster the energy to do the whole performance of okayness. Instead, I did something radical: I told the truth.

Standing among a cluster of women I'd never met, I told them how miserable I had been at my "great" job. I told them how for eight years I'd tried so hard to "make it work" until I became so burned out, depressed, and anxious that I quit. With no plan.

I braced for the onslaught of judgment. Instead, they all nodded, and then they all began sharing:

That's exactly how I feel. I've never heard anyone else explain it like that before.

That's not normal?! I don't think I know anyone who doesn't *feel this way.*

I keep thinking that with the next promotion, I'll finally feel like I've made it, but I'm starting to think that's not happening.

I keep wondering how the hell I got here. I worked so hard and did all the things I was supposed to do.

I would quit my job, but I have no idea what else I would do.

I wish I had a passion that I could follow, but I just don't. Isn't it too late to start over anyway?

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I wake up full of dread every single day, and I just live my life biding my time from vacation to vacation.

Let me know what you find out. I've been trying to figure out how to leave my company for three years!

I finally understood what they meant when they say "the truth will set you free." It's so annoying when a common aphorism like that turns out to be right, but I subsequently started sharing my story more openly with friends and former coworkers and anyone else I met. I also began asking people how they felt about their own work, which is when I realized that many brilliant and accomplished people were all secretly miserable in their jobs, unmotivated and uninspired, just trying to make it through the day.

I looked for terminology to describe this condition, but there was none, so I came up with my own: the Underfulfilled Overachiever, or UFOA for short.

Underfulfilled Overachiever (n.)*:*

1. *A constant striver who is living a great-on-paper life, has checked all the boxes, done all the "right" things, amassed achievements and external success, yet still feels secretly dissatisfied, unfulfilled, and increasingly disconnected from their work, life, and self.*
2. *Someone who suffers from the foundational belief that achievement is the path to lasting fulfillment.*

A friend of a friend had started doing this thing called "coaching" as a side hustle; apparently, she'd gotten certified through an official coaching training program. It piqued my interest, though I

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couldn't explain why. "Coaching" seemed like a dubious career path to me. Nonetheless, I signed up for a Coaching Fundamentals course. I figured I was investing in learning a new skill set that I could apply when I returned to the corporate world and to managing teams—because yes, on many days I was still convinced that going back would be what I'd eventually end up doing.

To my complete surprise, it was there, in a poorly lit conference room in Midtown Manhattan, that I found the thing—or at least *a* thing—that reminded me of who I was. The language, the philosophy, the exercises, the strategy—it all made such intuitive sense to me. Maybe there was a framework and an approach that could help me figure out what I was doing with my life after all.

Inspired by the coaching training, I found myself creating the guidebook for living that I'd been seeking but didn't seem to exist. Originally, it was intended just for me, documenting the tools, strategies, techniques, and step-by-step processes I was uncovering to make sure I'd *never* end up in this situation again. But I also sent an email to a few friends sharing my Underfulfilled Overachiever story and offering, in exchange for a cup of coffee, a "practice" coaching session to anyone who could relate. I expected that maybe a few generous friends might humor me. Instead, I was overwhelmed with appointment requests. Those first meetings led to second and then third sessions. Suddenly, I had regular clients, other UFOAs who were also consummate strivers, who'd checked all the boxes, done all the "right" things, and frequently achieved everything they'd set out to do, yet still found themselves deeply dissatisfied, desperately unfulfilled, and increasingly disconnected from themselves, wondering, *Is this all there is?*

Instead of what I'd been learning in my coaching training, though,

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what was resonating the most was the method from the guide for living that I'd begun to develop. And it actually seemed to be working. Through our sessions, not only were these fellow UFOAs recovering from their Underfulfilled Overachieverness and building lives they loved living, but I was, too.

The Underfulfilled Overachiever Problem

On its surface, the Underfulfilled Overachiever problem appears to be an individual one. But the more clients I coached, the clearer it became just how widespread and entrenched within our culture the problem really is. How could it be that so many of us were living these great-on-paper lives that felt anything but great on the inside? We had done exactly what society had told us to do, but we had received none of the results that we were promised. Why was no one talking about this?! (It was 2014, and few people were talking about it. Thankfully, that's changing.) This was clearly not just a me (or an any-other-individual-person) problem. It was a systemic one and a pretty freaking consequential one at that—consequential for our health, for our economy, for our culture, and for our general aliveness, individually and collectively.

My question—"What am I doing with my life?"—had morphed into "What are *we* doing with our lives?" and then, finally, "What did they tell us to do with our lives?" with the critical addenda of "How the hell do we stop doing it?" and "What do we do instead?"

At the end of the six-month Not-That Experiment, I still had no job, just a trickle of income, and only a vague plan. Yet somehow, inexplicably, I felt clearer than ever about the direction in which my life was heading next, even though my ultimate destination was still

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uncertain. An odd thing began to happen, so subtle I didn't even notice at first: I stopped caring so much about The Plan or knowing where I'd be in twelve months, let alone in five years. I only cared about how I felt toward what I was doing now.

I was also super pissed. We had been taught to play by the rules of a game that didn't exist anymore and maybe never had. We were sold a story that if we worked hard enough and made the right choices, we would live successful, happy, and fulfilled lives. But what happens when you end up with all the success and none of the fulfillment?

In the decade since, I've heard some version of the same story from thousands of UFOAs: "I did everything I was supposed to do. I worked hard, then even harder, and achieved all the things I set out to achieve. I was showered with praise and admiration and never doubted that if I did all this, I would 'make it' and be happy. But I'm not."

For some, this looked like getting an alphabet's worth of degrees, climbing the corporate ladder, and amassing awards and bonuses. For others, it was getting married by twenty-five, having a bunch of kids by thirty-five, and living in an *Architectural Digest*–worthy home. For still others, it was being the "perfect" daughter and granddaughter, dutifully caring for their elders. Or it was rejecting capitalism and Big Education to live off the grid. It didn't matter what the "supposed to" was. The narrative was always the same.

I've heard this story from C-suite executives of public companies, founders of successful start-ups, tenured professors, law firm partners, bestselling authors, EICs of magazines, valedictorians and veterinarians, restaurateurs and executive chefs, investment bankers and visual artists, heart surgeons and meditation instructors, engineers and educators, college freshmen and PhD candidates, politicians and musicians, people at nonprofits and people in public

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