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 Turkel 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
“DIE EMPTY” 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 gravitate toward one of the three kinds of work at the expense of the others, and while the negative effects of neglect may not be evident in the short term, they can be disastrous in the long term. For example, some people love to plan, but have a difficult time mustering the will to actually do the work. Others love to dive into the work, but fail to regularly step back to define the context and objectives in a way that keeps them on course. Still others are great at planning and executing, but they aren’t taking time to expand their knowledge and skills and thus become less effective over time. Depending on how disciplined you are about engaging in the three types of work, there are four profiles you can fall into: Developer, Driver, Drifter, Dreamer.

Mapping + Making + Meshing = Developer

The Developer is constantly weaving together available resources and opportunities to create value. He doesn’t work frantically, but instead works with urgency and diligence, making plans and then executing them, learning from his actions, and then redirecting as needed. He recognizes that uncertainty is not an enemy, but a natural part of engaging in important and valuable work. He also knows that opportunities are valuable only if he is prepared to take advantage of them, and as such he is constantly developing the skills that will be needed when he gets where he wants to go rather than where he is currently. If you want to die empty of regret, with a body of work you can be proud of, you must focus on becoming a Developer.
Mapping + Making − Meshing = Driver

The Driver is extremely focused on results, and spends most of his time planning and checking tasks off lists. He is obsessed with today’s results, but does little to increase his platform for future effectiveness. As a result, he becomes narrowly effective and is often unable to spot or take advantage of opportunities if they are outside his immediate area of focus.

Someone with a tendency toward being a Driver may begin his career strongly because sheer discipline and the ability to plan and execute separates him from the pack. However, he may slowly wane in performance over time because he is only doing more of the same, but neglecting to grow his skills and develop the intangibles that will allow him to tackle new challenges. Sadly, sheer will and determination is only one element of success. Because of this, the Driver typically fails to unleash his full potential or find his sweet spot.

Making + Meshing − Mapping = Drifter

The Drifter greatly enjoys the process of Making, and loves to develop his skills and engage his curiosity (Meshing), but is a poor planner (Mapping). As a result, he frequently bounces from project to project and goes wherever his latest whim carries him. He has a good work ethic and may even be quite successful in short bursts, but his lack of strategic Mapping means that there is a lot of wasted opportunity and little strategic progress. He lacks the conviction of a long-term plan.

Because of his failure to map effectively, the Drifter fails to follow through on many of his ideas and projects. He gets stuck
and doesn’t see things through to the end. He may have spotty success, but wonder why his work never seems to sustain itself.

Meshing + Mapping − Making = Dreamer

The final combination is the Dreamer. He is obsessed with ideas and personal growth (Meshing) and strategic plans (Mapping), but lacks the conviction, courage, or work ethic to put his plans in motion (Making). The Dreamer is a talker, but he rarely accomplishes much. He can be effective when he wants to, but quickly loses interest and rarely finishes much of what he starts because he’s always moving on to the next great thing.

Every person—and organization—will gravitate toward one profile or another from time to time. (I tend toward the Drifter.) There is nothing inherently wrong with any of the types in moderation, as long as you are aware of how they have the potential to consume your work. To truly put yourself in the best possible position to unleash your best work, you must adopt a Developer mind-set, meaning that you are disciplined about Mapping, Making, and Meshing so that you leverage all the opportunities and resources at your disposal.

Chapters 4 through 10 will address the most common ways people neglect the three kinds of work, and offer tangible practices to help you purposefully engage in them so that you aren’t leaving important considerations to chance. As mentioned earlier, most of us are well versed in how to plan a project, and how to organize our days in order to make progress on it. But there are subtle ways in which we can lose our bearing or succumb to stasis if we do not purposefully weed out distractions, or continually ask ourselves if we are still on the right course.
Cultivating the Developer mind-set (Mapping + Making + Meshing) takes time and persistent focus, and a willingness to constantly disrupt and question not only what you’re doing, but how you’re doing it. As you engage with the mind-set of a Developer, actively engaging in all three kinds of work, you will be better positioned to identify the areas where you contribute the most value, the elements of work that are most personally gratifying, and new opportunities that you’d like to pursue. In other words, you will be better positioned to build a body of work that you will be proud of later.

Invisible Impact

In the early 1970s, a Detroit-based singer-songwriter named Rodriguez emerged onto the music scene. He was spotted by music executives while 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.