



## **Accessing the Power of Meaningful Work**

By Janice Knight

In an interview late in his life, the psychologist Sigmund Freud was asked to expound on what he felt were the most important constituents of life. His answer? “*Liebe und Arbeit.*” *Love and work.* This is hardly a surprise: For most of human history, the meaning of work and the meaning of life intersected at survival. *Work was life.*

When cheap energy and mechanization started us down the path of staggering increases in productivity, some philosophers and visionaries began speculating about how we would use the extra “leisure time” we would gain from all this productivity. The reality has proved much different than projected. How do we spend the “extra time?” We work.

Yet for many of us, work that we would call “meaningful” remains elusive. We can’t always pinpoint what is missing or what it is that would give our work lives meaning.

### **Finding Your Genius**

Ultimately, the meaning in your work isn’t whether the enterprise you work for is local or “transnational,” but how closely the work you perform within that organization is in alignment with what author Dick Richards labels “your genius.”

In his book *Is Your Genius at Work?* Richards uses the term to mean that unique intersection between what you are good at (your gift) and what you love to do (your passion). As he explains it, you have just one genius, it is a positive talent, and it can be described in a two-word phrase such as “Engaging the Heart,” or “Optimizing Results.” While his rules may be a little rigid, the point is well-taken: Your genius is a transitive verb, not an adjective. It’s about doing something, not being something.

Once you have identified your unique genius, the challenge becomes how to find that often-elusive intersection between your genius and that “unmet need” in the world, so that someone will pay you to work in a way that uses your genius. But by identifying and labeling your genius, Richards says, you gain in confidence and in the ability to articulate just how you can contribute in those situations. Your heart gets into alignment with your work, and suddenly work looks more like play.

### **The Alarm-Clock Test**

This, then, begs the question: What is the meaning of “meaningful?” To answer questions like that, you can apply the Alarm-Clock Test. If the alarm clock rings and you’re already out of bed getting ready for work because you are thrilled by what you’re doing and each new day on the job is certain to provide some worthy experience, then the chances are pretty good that you’re somewhere near that sweet spot—regardless of the size of the enterprise that employs you.

But if you're failing the Alarm-Clock Test—not some of the time, but all the time—looking for a different kind of work makes sense. These days, more and more people in that situation are turning toward self-employment opportunities as the key to matching up purpose with genius. All the challenges of figuring out what to do and how best to do it come along with that change.

### **What Will Your Story Be?**

To get a better understanding of your relationship with meaningful work, Mark Guterman, co-founder of MeaningfulCareers.com, suggests imagining a future situation in which you will be telling others your story of how work and meaning finally came together for you. To prepare the story, he suggests reflecting on questions such as the following:

- How does your work contribute to the future?
- For whom do you work?
- How has your relationship with work changed over the course of your life?
- What role has serendipity, coincidence, luck, etc., played in your work life?
- How have fun, play, humor, etc., been a part of meaningful work?
- Do you have a philosophy, mission, vision, etc. that guides your work life? If so, what is it and how did you come to it?
- What poetry, quotes, sayings, prayers, music, spiritual writings, pictures, photographs, paintings, etc. represent and/or guide your work life? How do they inform your work?

Finding meaningful work is often a lifelong process, as we see from Po Bronson's *What Should I Do With My Life?*, which chronicles the lives of those who have found it, often later in life or after a life crisis or a very deliberate effort.

“Finding the ‘sweet spot’ is an iterative process,” Bronson explains. “You catalogue what you *know* to be your gifts and passions (i.e., your genius), research what is needed, and keep at it until you find an overlap. Then you see if the overlap is *viable*. If it is, you're there. If not, you keep looking. This can be a lifetime process, but if we're diligent, we *can* find the sweet spot.”

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