Am I Doing This Right?: A Philosophical Guide to Life in the Age of Overwhelm

by Colleen Bordeaux

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Dave's Reading Highlights

To everyone in the exquisitely uncool position of trying, failing, learning and growing, I see you, I am you, we'll be cool when we're dead, stay warm & keep going.

If you plan on being anything less than you are capable of being, you will probably be unhappy all the days of your life." - Abraham Maslow So why is it that so many of us croak at eighty, diseased and regretful of the lives we lived? Bronnie Ware, an Australian hospice nurse, observed her dying patients over many years and noticed some common themes that she published in her book "The Top 5 Regrets of the Dying." You know what their single biggest regret was? "I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." That is so effed up.

Your goal should be to waste as little of your life as possible." - John C. Maxwell

After spending far too much time caring about things that didn't matter, I had a full-fledged quarter-life crisis. I was paralyzed with indecision, signing apartment leases, then canceling the check, interviewing and accepting jobs, then reneging, waffling on what city

to live in, plagued with FOMO ('fear of missing out', for anyone lucky enough to be unfamiliar with that terrible affliction), and insecure from comparing myself to other people. In fact, I *almost* broke up with my now-husband because I thought he liked me too much and how could that be possible if I was such a hot mess? In a nutshell, I was not chill about anything, overanalyzed everything and generally sucked at life.

Ok, where were we? Ah yes, the only 7 questions that matter in life. I've conveniently organized each question into a chapter for you: Chapter 1: Who the eff am I? An introduction to self and identity Chapter 2: Why am I running around in this meat suit? An overview of purpose and vocation Chapter 3: Speaking of my meat suit, is there a user guide? A foundation for keeping your body healthy as long as you care to live Chapter 4: What about that big blob of cholesterol that tells me what to do? An orientation to mind control Chapter 5: Who the eff are these people? A fundamental truth about the power of the company you keep Chapter 6: How do I pay for this? An attitude on acquiring wealth Chapter 7: Where am I meant to end up? A beginner's perspective on how to let go of your white-knuckle grip on life

You lack nothing, use what I gave you." - God

To be nobody but yourself, in a world which does its best, day and night, to make you like everyone else, means to fight the hardest battle any human being can ever fight and never stop fighting" - E.E. Cummings

It would have been so much easier to have just been cool. To have had the right looks, the right talents, the right hobbies, the right friends, the right clothes, etc. I'd tried (and failed at) all of the things that makes one cool in middle school, including preparing a solo acapella audition—with dance moves, might I add, because I was truly committed—for Show Choir where I was cut for lacking the talent to back up my stage presence. It was a series of crushing defeats that helped me to realize that I wasn't going to be beautiful or popular, so I might as well be smart and develop a good personality.

Mark Twain once said that the worst loneliness is to not be comfortable with yourself.

When I started blogging and freelance writing, a few colleagues told me it was dumb, would limit my potential, and I should quit or keep it really quiet. Even though writing brought me so much joy, it made me deeply ashamed of what I was producing. I remember walking through O'Hare on my way to a huge meeting with an important client and deciding that it was time to delete the blog and hunker down on my practical path, afraid that a client would Google me, find my half-baked creativity on full display and fire me. So, I pretended like my creative work didn't matter and kept it in a small, safe place, allowing myself to believe that other people's opinions were more important than my own

You change the world by being yourself." - Yoko Ono

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish, little cloud of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy... I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want it to burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." - George Bernard Shaw

Also, there is a very important caveat that comes with the topic of life purpose that most people don't realize. And it's this: every single privilege you were born with, that so many of the other seven billion other people here on Earth were not, exponentially deepens your responsibility to find and use your purpose for the benefit of the world. For example, I am going to assume that if you are reading this book, you are literate and have at least $10 worth of disposable income which puts you way up on top of the world population when it comes to privilege. It's your responsibility to use that privilege to make something of yourself, to be of value, to do something to ease

the burden of others who didn't get to enjoy the same stroke of luck in this life. Barry Schwartz described our excess of choices as the ultimate first world problem, and until we solve for opportunity redistribution, we must use our privilege to increase our individual abilities to give back to the world.

Your job does not translate into your purpose, and the false belief that you can "find a job you're passionate about" has led a lot of people to waste big chunks of their lives chasing some abstraction of life purpose that does not exist.

In his amazing book, Originals, Adam Grant shares proof that those who change the world for the better aren't unusually smart or especially talented — nor do they have unusual passion or even much of an appetite for risk. Instead, they simply saw a problem that no one else was addressing, and took a different approach to solving it. Simply put, anyone can think differently, take action, and improve the world in their own way.

When I started my first job in management consulting, I went in with soaring expectations and a shiny new collection of Brooks Brothers suits. I'd studied hard for my case interviews, researched the firm at length, and knew in my soul that it was "what I was meant to do," whatever that meant. I utterly despised it within a week of my start date. And by "utterly despised," I mean my body had a visceral reaction and everything in me was telling me to quit. Think sleepless nights, midday tears in the bathroom, and an unshakable urge to flee. (Isn't it strange how our bodies rebel when we hate something? No judgment if being a sleep-deprived lunatic is your thing.) If I am being totally honest, it also gave me a confidence shattering case of doubt in myself and my ability to make big decisions, such as choosing a career path. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what it was that drove such a deep emotional response in me, but I didn't want to suffer through the time required to reflect. I wanted out, ASAP. I remember standing at Starbucks waiting for my latte and envying the barista, because she seemed so content and focused on what she was doing for the packed room of people.

One day after I accepted a role that would take me far from Washington, D.C., my friends and my relationship with my now-husband, I met a woman at my firm's office who sensed my distress (and by "sensed," I mean "accidentally walked into a conference room and found me sobbing") and gave me the best career advice I've ever received: "Never run from, only to, a position," she said. "You need to figure out what you want, and then take logical steps to get it." She asked me to slow down and take time to complete a simple exercise in structuring my thoughts, and if I still wanted to make that decision afterwards, I should be confident moving forward.

Below are the instructions. If you do this exercise right, it will take you a few hours. (If you're someone who needs more structure, you can also download a template for this exercise on my website at colleenbordeaux.com/book.)

Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens." - Carl Jung

There are plenty of people between the ages of 80 and 100 years old in nursing homes (or in the homes of people who have been forced to become primary caregivers because they cannot afford a nursing home for their loved ones) across the country, in wheelchairs, tied to catheters, and in an incredible amount of physical and spiritual pain. There are also many people between the ages of 80 and 100 years old who are teaching yoga classes, giving keynote speeches and island hopping on yachts in the Caribbean. If you don't believe me, Google Tao Porchon Lynch, who is currently 100-something years old, can fold her legs behind her head and speak to groups of thousands, then jog off the stage and give Tony Robbins a high five. Which group does your eighty-year-old self want to be in?

"Every day you spend working on yourself to be better than you were yesterday isn't only for you but the betterment of everyone around you." - Rachel Wolchin

Two things helped me take back control of my mind, and I am going to tell you what those things were, and then explain how you can

repeat them for yourself: #1: I learned that I could control my thoughts. A friend who could see that I was slowly losing it recommended I read Eckhart Tolle's "The Power of Now." Tolle argued that most of us focus on things we literally cannot control: we wind ourselves up over things that happened in the past that we can't change, or we worry about hypothetical situations in the future that we cannot possibly influence. I learned that the only things we can actually control are our minds and our actions in the present moment —and there's an incredible relief that comes with letting go of trying to control anything else. #2: I realized that I was the problem. After a few rounds of interviews to escape my project, a rival firm offered me an extremely generous job offer. Tempted to take it, I went to one of my mentors at the firm for advice. She pointed out that I could leave, join the new firm, get on a new project, and run into the exact same situation. Her advice made me realize that running away wasn't going to resolve the root issue. Armed with the painful self-awareness that I was causing my own misery, I turned down the job offer, began reading every book ever written on the topic of mindset management, and started to do the work to control my own negative thinking.

Consider the situations where your negative thinking is triggered and how it might impact the people around you, and outline the alternate thoughts and behaviors that you will hold yourself accountable to in order to produce better outcomes, both in your own actions and through the responses you generate in other people. There have been a few great books on this that describe the common scenarios where most people get stuck in their negative thinking and limit their potential to connect and influence. My favorite is "How to Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie.

You are the same today that you are going to be in five years except for two things: the people with whom you associate, and the books you read." - Charles Jones

Let me say that again: It is entirely your responsibility to develop and grow a web of high-quality relationships that helps you serve the world with your gifts and talents. And it's getting harder than ever to

do that, for a number of complex reasons. George Will of the Washington Post recently published a thought-provoking article on the loneliness epidemic in this country, dubbing it our number one public health crisis with physical and medical ramifications beyond being a driver of the pervasive mental health disorders of our day (i.e., depression, anxiety, etc.). For example, "persistent loneliness" is more dangerous to longevity than often-cited causes of death, like heavy drinking and obesity, reducing average life span more than twice and three times as much, respectively. According to researchers at Brigham Young University, the impact of loneliness has comparable physical ramifications to smoking fifteen cigarettes a day and contributes to cognitive decline, including the rapid onset of Alzheimer's disease.

You're the average of the five people you spend the most time with" - Jim Rohn

When E.E. Cummings wrote (in my favorite poem of all time that I have now referenced at least three times) that "to be nobody but yourself in a world which does its best, day and night, to make you everyone else, is to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight and never stop fighting," he was talking about how defeating it can be when you're trying to tune in to your inner voice, and you can barely hear it because of all the loudmouthed people rattling off lists of reasons you shouldn't believe in yourself because they've never tried it themselves.

I know that I'm not supposed to say this, but I knew that if I stayed near my family, the negativity, drama, anger and sadness would hold me back in life. I'd call my parents and insist that we not talk about my brother, which they eventually respected. I'd visit for controlled periods of time, mentally preparing in advance, so I could roll with whatever drama was unfolding and then escape back to the psychological safety of my own city. The reason I am telling you all of this is because I know how hard it can be to deal with toxic or negative relationships in your own family, to decide that you will no longer tolerate those relationships in your life, to put boundaries on interactions with people you love, and to walk away from a

relationship with a family member completely. Looking back more than ten years later, it was the most important decision I ever made for my own growth and created the necessary space to build a healthier relationship with my parents and my brother, who is currently rebuilding his own life in Minneapolis, of all places.

It is incredibly important to put some qualifications on who you invite into your life to absorb your time and energy, and allow those relationships that aren't quite working to fade away so you can fill the space with those that light you up. You're the only person who knows the kind of relationship that lights you up versus saps your joy, but there are some simple steps you can take to help you get started on improving the relationships you cultivate: #1 Assess your own crab-status. Be honest: are you a net positive person in the relationships you have? Are you normally positive, optimistic and supportive, or do you easily succumb to negativity, jealousy and fear? It's important that you start to take control of your own mind to become a net-positive person in order to cultivate better relationships. Read Chapter 4, "What about that big blob of cholesterol that tells me what to do" for how to do this yourself. Once you can firmly say you're (mostly) not a crab, proceed to step #2. #2 Take stock of who you're spending time with. Make a list of the people who you spend time with, including colleagues. Include people who you regularly interact with, either in person or virtually. Get 'em all down on paper. #3 Consider who you're not spending time with, but want to be spending time with. Add them to the above list. #4 Evaluate these relationships based on what you need in your life. #5 Eliminate or manage the relationships that aren't working to create more space for the ones you need.

Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called this 'idiot compassion,' where you continue a friendship with someone not right for you because you cannot bear the discomfort of being truthful and upsetting the other person. He actually frames this as selfishness, because you put your own need for comfort over the other person's need for your honesty and authenticity.

So toppling capitalism will not be covered in this chapter. The key idea I want you to take away from this section is that you need to

reframe how you think about money so that your focus is on adding value and not on getting currency. If you make other people's lives better, easier, or happier, money will follow. Let me say that a different way: deliver value, and you will get paid for results. The more value you deliver, the more you will be paid.

The price of anything is the amount of life you exchange for it." - Henry David Thoreau

"Many times the wrong train took me to the right place." - Paulo Coelho

We have a lot of strange ideas and assumptions about success, that it's an instantaneous thing: you meet the love of your life, the dream opportunity lands on your lap, you find the right diet pill and your hot body is available to you a week later, and so on. The reality is that successful life outcomes, however we define them, are built upon tiny, daily thoughts and actions. Those tiny, daily thoughts and actions must change if you want your life outcomes to change, and they must change in a way that aligns to the realities you would like to produce in your own life.

"Action expresses priorities." -Gandhi