

CHAPTER 1: WHO ARE YOU WORKING FOR?

Nature's Food Chain

Imagine a mother sea turtle on a warm, white-sand beach, basking in the sun. She has dug a burrow and laid dozens of eggs. She flips sand over those eggs and then abandons them, flapping across the sand to the ocean. Most of those eggs hatch. The babies excavate themselves from the sand, their soft shells glistening in the sun. Flailing their tiny legs across the wet sand, many get picked off by sea birds. Of those that do make it to the water, most of those are eaten as well.

In the natural world, many offspring are produced in vast numbers, but most don't make it to a reproducing age. (This "survivorship curve" is especially true with plants, invertebrates, and lower vertebrate life-forms.) The late UCLA Professor Raymond Cowles identified these "excess" critters as *superfluous* reproduction because they *aren't needed* to maintain the species population. (In today's parlance, they are disposable "non-essentials.")

Cowles named this animal overproduction the *Biokrene*, meaning "well of life." Instead of a well, call it a drain, because that's where all the devoured are going—down the drain! These teeming numbers of small fry are *not* essential to their own species but to the *food chain*. The main purpose of these anonymous individuals is to feed *other* species.

Yes, you heard that right.

The mother turtle is partly working for the food chain! Many of her babies are merely food for larger, hungry animals. These tidbits will not contribute to the future of their own species. As the excess numbers are picked off for dinner, only the fitter (and luckier) representatives of the species survive to reproduce and express their genetic information.

Now consider this:

You and the Economic Food Chain

What does the food chain in nature have to do with people? Many people toil away in obscurity, barely subsisting, like so many anonymous animals. They *enrich others* with their purchases and bill payments! Their income is simply “food” for economic “predators” needing a tasty meal of cash (in exchange for satisfying needs and wants). Aren’t you simply creating other people’s income when you spend your money?

Is your *sole* purpose to make others rich? Is your life *really* about paying bills? In doing so, you enrich other companies, banks, and utilities. (You have already enriched the college or university if you attended.) Now you run to the gas station and grocery store—*money for them*. You run to the big box stores—*money for them*. You click through an online shopping cart—*Venmo for them*.

- Every purchase, obligation, debt, or bill you pay is an expense or a liability to you.
- At the same time, you represent an *asset* on a business’s financial statement!

Your Life Devoured?

Are you mostly living “paycheck to paycheck?” If so, you’re an *economic prey*. Your income is food in the economic chain. Most months you pay *everybody else*, and there’s little or *nothing* left for *you*. Any emergency expenditures are disastrous.

- Worse, you spend little time, money, or effort to pursue *your* dreams.
- Like the animal’s devoured offspring, you’ve made little *impact* on society.
- You are *unknown* to the world: except to family, friends, and (maybe) the businesses that consume your income.

The greatest danger
for most of us is not that
our aim is too high and
we miss it, but that it is
too low and we reach it.

MICHAELANGELO

Realizing *Their* Dreams, Not Yours

Let’s pick a more “fun” topic. People spend considerable income on entertainment. People pay *lots* of money (and do crazy things) *not* to be bored! They spend time, attention, and energy consuming and viewing entertainment.

So you’re a fan of actors, musicians, vocalists, or “personalities?” That makes those stars wealthy and famous.

You’re paying them to realize *their* dreams and perfect *their* craft. Those famous folks lump you into their anonymous platform, following, or fan base. Like the baby turtles, you are *nameless*. The artist “farms” this fan base for recurring cash flow: a new movie, a new song, a new book.

Are you spending the same time and money on *your* dreams?

You ... a Modern-day Sharecropper?

So, are you spending most of your paycheck making other people wealthy? Are you merely their servant? Are you merely a modern-day sharecropper? Will that be your only life purpose? And are you raising children to play the same role?

Don't get the idea that this book merely addresses economic servitude. It just happens to be the most common indicator that you're working for others instead of yourself. You can just as easily be trapped, boxed-in, or stuck for many nonfinancial reasons. We'll examine them in the next chapter.

Your Life's Purpose

You might protest:

"Oh, No! I'm not a food source for stores!" Really? How much money do you save for yourself?

*"Besides, everyone has needs and wants." That's true, but meeting your basic needs shouldn't be your **only** purpose.*

Making Everybody Else Rich but Killing Your Own Dreams

While you toil away for others, you're not building your goals. You are worn out. If you have goals, you don't work on them. You've given up your dreams for other people.

Ill-Defined Goals

You might protest: "But I do have goals in life." Okay, when will you know you succeeded?

People claim they have goals. But their goals are so vague they won't know when (or if) they're successful. Simply "living life" is terminated at your death! If you are just living life, then what is your "success"?

Perhaps you want "security" or "happiness." Or maybe you want to raise a great family, help people, make a contribution to the world? However, your chances of success are not that high unless you create benchmarks for your goal.

- Can you measure your goal?
- How do you specify or define it?
- How will you know if (or when) you'll achieve it?
- Does your answer depend on your *current* job or family status, age, etc.?

So what's the problem with a goal like happiness? Happiness isn't a tangible goal, such as losing 10 pounds, which you can measure. Losing 10 pounds looks the same for every person who loses 10 pounds, but happiness is different for every single person and can change from moment to moment. Plus happiness can be affected by things beyond our control. You may find happiness skiing, but what if no snow falls the week you book to go skiing? How would that impact your happiness?

Lost Dreams

The mass of men lead lives of quiet
desperation.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Think about your dreams of youth, you know, those idealistic fantasies you had about making a difference in the world. Remember those ideas of being a world traveler? Or perhaps they were dreams of writing, singing, or dancing—expressing your creative spirit. How does it feel knowing you’ve abandoned those dreams? **You’ve made compromises your whole life, and now your life feels “compromised.”** In fact, you’re not even sure where you put your dreams, or if you ever had them. The dreams of your life have been stuffed so far down the list they feel unattainable.

You are painfully aware that you live far *below* your dreams. You know something is missing in your life. You feel trapped in mere “existing.” There *must* be more to life than the endlessly repeating cycle of fighting the commute, working, buying, consuming, and paying bills. The entertainment you chase is not always satisfying. Your life seems to drift, and that’s deeply frustrating.

- You’re not sure of your ultimate life’s purpose.
- But you know neither your life nor your job is the best it could be!

For some people, having a job provides them with an “identity.” This “label” becomes their purpose. Perhaps that’s enough for some but *not* for you.

- You want to achieve a noble purpose.
- What if you could work toward a higher purpose, and a new life, or a better career?

What is the ultimate waste of your time on this earth?

- Living to enrich the businesses where you shop and work.
- Not having a purpose for living
- Living your life anonymously
- Depleting your energy doing things that don’t matter.
- Living your life in meaningless misery.
- Regretting the things you “thought” about doing—but gave up.

Do you want to realize late in life that you could have had a better life, or helped more people, or achieved a greater purpose? If you had only known, your life would have been much better. Are you doomed to that deep regret?

A voice is telling you something is amiss. But that voice doesn’t need to be a passive witness. Later in the book, we’ll awaken that voice.

As we have seen, every life has a purpose. Even the little turtles that are eaten are noble: They help other species survive. But your contribution doesn't have to stop at feeding others. Your life purpose *could be* working to enrich other people. Your life could also represent something more than mere servitude: You could work on your dreams.

The Facets of Being Stuck

WHERE there is no vision, the people perish.

PROVERBS 29:18

We've examined the hallmarks of a meaningless life. As we've seen in this chapter, work is a common way of being stuck. You can be stuck economically as a consumer (and nonsaver). But being stuck can include other aspects. You could be emotionally

stuck, unwilling to leave a toxic relationship. Your life could be dominated by your perceived obligations to family or a significant other. You may be unable to get started working toward a personal goal. No matter how you're stuck, you put your needs last, and you neglect your goals.

But there's a problem. You *believe* you're stuck, and you're a long way from *your* dreams. How do you get out of these boxes? How can you ever move beyond them? You are stumped. Next, we'll examine how we get "boxed-in." Why do we feel we have no options? Is that really true? What's the key to escape? Is there a key?

Conclusion

Yes, there is a way out of the box. It starts with awareness and reflection. Have you paused in your reading for a moment and reflected on your situation? Have you realized where you're not working for your benefit? Did you remember the dreams you've given up? Then you've taken the first step.

But you need to know more about the ways you get stuck. Then, together, we'll help you find your escape.