Building a Whole Life, Not Just a Career



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Think about the last time you had a conversation with someone new. It likely kicked off with a question asking, “What do you do?” and then maybe “What do you like to do?” Most of the time, these two topics are considered separately. Why is that?

More often than not, we separate our careers from our hobbies. For many people, that works very well. However, for all the emphasis placed on cultivating balance over the last few years, many Americans still report feeling overwhelming levels of stress. And although some elements are out of our control, it is important to consider how we can create a life with more fun, balance and rest — one where we get to enjoy what we do on the whole, no matter what it is.

In other words, it’s building a whole life, not just a career.

To clarify, a whole life does not mean that we are passionate about every area of our lives. However, it is about balancing the energy we emit between all areas of our life. Once one area becomes too draining, it’s time to look at it more seriously.

In web development, we use heatmaps with different colors to indicate the most-visited (green) and least-visited (red) areas of a webpage, and we can apply this same method to find the level of engagement in our lives. If you’re interested in building a whole life, I invite you to imagine the week as a heatmap on your calendar, where areas of your days take on different colors according to the varying degrees of stress and satisfaction in your schedule.

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Red zone, green zone

The first step toward building a whole life is creating awareness. Let’s start with just a typical week – the whole week, including free time. Look at how much time you spend on activities that give you joy or contentment (green zone), activities that make you feel neutral or uneasy (yellow zone), and activities that drain your energy (red zone).

I have recently done this exercise myself. Over the past few years, I’ve put a lot of time and energy into my career. And although these efforts paid off for me professionally, I started to realize that I was leaving almost no time outside of work for “green zone” activities. I was just coming home from work, having dinner and going to bed, leaving very little space for joy and adventure. So, I started to make changes: I took ballroom dancing classes and singing lessons and started at a new, group-focused gym. I bought fresh seafood and invited friends over for dinner. I surrounded myself with

people and activities that excited me, and I slowly began to pay attention to every element of my life, not just the demands of my career. And as more hours of my day slid out of the "red zone" and into the "green," I was not only happier outside of the office but also happier and more productive inside the office.

Of course, every hour of the day will not be in the green zone – there will always be tasks required of us that we'd rather not do. But if we can change our mindset, we might be able to view the things we dislike as necessary stepping stones to get us back to the green zone. For example, I might not want to do my laundry, but I know that I'll feel better when I'm dancing if I have fresh-smelling clothes. Or, when I clean my kitchen, I know that I can invite friends over for dinner at the drop of a hat. In this way, we change these tasks from red to at least green-adjacent.

Furthermore, living in the green zone is about more than your chosen career. Loving what you do for work is fantastic, but know that it's not everything you do. My friend is a software engineer, but you would never know it – his passions (and the things he talks about most) are golfing and fitness. He has created a life where his work is the fuel for the activities that bring him genuine joy and fulfillment. He enjoys his job, but he also understands that work is simply one piece of the puzzle he has integrated into the larger picture of his life.

No matter what role work plays in your life, it is important to actively assess your heat map to ensure you prioritize the practices, activities and people that put you in the green zone.

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Yellow zone – proceed with caution

The green zone and the red zone are the extremes. The more nebulous (and potentially more dangerous) “yellow zone” is when you tip over into complacency. There are more things you don’t like than you do, but you feel your situation isn’t “bad enough” to warrant a massive change. You become lethargic, unmotivated and unfulfilled. But in living in the yellow zone, you rob yourself of the chance to experience your full potential, slowing what could be an upwardly mobile career to a crawl.

Again, the key is to pay attention. If you notice yourself slipping into the yellow zone, evaluate your options. Is there something outside of work causing this feeling, or is it the work itself? Is this a temporary feeling that will pass, or is it an ongoing and immovable situation you need to remove yourself from? And finally, is it possible you need to examine your mindset and make internal rather than external changes?

Whatever the cause is, don’t be afraid to ask for help and discuss your desire for change with your managers, mentors and friends/family. As a leader, my goal is to give the best experience to my employees while creating value for our company. If an employee is not completely happy in their role, I want to help them make changes that will allow them to thrive. As each employee moves into the green zone, it only helps the rest of us to follow suit.

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Your whole self is your authentic self

Your authentic self is your compass along the pathway to pursuing a whole life. The more we listen to and get comfortable with our authentic selves, the more precise our

direction will be. Tune into the signals your body sends you. What makes your eyes light up and cracks your mouth into a smile? And what makes you tense and clench your jaw, pretending to be someone else? What do you find you can't stop talking about, and what makes you retreat to the sidelines, afraid to voice your opinion?

When you ignore your instincts, it can leave you feeling disconnected and uninspired. You begin to build a whole life only when you tune into your authentic self and weave it into each part of every day.

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Prioritize the green zone

A fragmented life will quickly crumble at the first signs of stress. However, when we build a life where each element is integrated and valued, we will be far better equipped to handle the ups and downs that inevitably arise throughout our lives.

Building a whole life is an ongoing process, and it is one I am still in myself. None of us are always in the green zone, and we likely never will be. However, we will always have the power to take a step back, recalibrate and prioritize the things that connect us to our authentic selves and our whole, purpose-filled lives — the place where joy, gratitude and fulfillment thrive.

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