

YOUR GUIDE TO MEANINGFUL WORK
IN A CHANGING WORLD

Make Work Matter

The background of the cover features a textured, greyish-green fabric-like pattern. Overlaid on this are several large, semi-transparent, overlapping shapes in shades of teal, blue, and yellow-green. A white line drawing of a person's head and shoulders is superimposed on these shapes. The person's face is partially obscured by the teal shape, and their right hand is visible, holding a stack of papers or a book. The overall aesthetic is modern and artistic.

MICHAELA O'DONNELL, PH.D.

“*Make Work Matter* is a book that, like your work, matters. I have been working, teaching, and advocating for a deeper and broader integration of faith and work in hopes of a fuller realization of God’s invitation to participate in the ongoing incarnation through our work for over four decades. Happily, Michaela O’Donnell of Fuller Seminary’s De Pree Center is one of my favorite and most trusted colleagues in this mission. Michaela is a practitioner and a doer—as am I. She’s not your typical academic or “thought leader.” She’s built businesses, careers, and a life. She just happens to be attentive enough to what has and hasn’t been helpful in her practice to have also become a brilliant teacher and communicator. This book goes the next step beyond the many books now espousing good ideas about the sacred value of good work and moves into how to actively discern, find, and do it. The pursuit of good work takes work—and this book is a powerful tool to focus your labors and ease the challenge of that worthy pursuit. I recommend it heartily.”

Dave Evans, cofounder, Stanford Life Design Lab; coauthor, *Designing Your Life* and *Designing Your Work Life*; and venture partner, Praxis Labs

“Most of us spend more waking hours on work than anything else. In the midst of the demands of navigating the twists and turns of work today, *Make Work Matter* gives you the road map you need to maximize those hours for your own growth, calling, fulfillment, and formation.”

Kara Powell, PhD, chief of leadership formation and executive director, Fuller Youth Institute; coauthor, *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*

“Dr. Michaela O’Donnell’s *Make Work Matter* offers a life-giving, meaning-making invitation, recipe, and coaching session about work—all in one. She is a very motivating exemplar of what she writes about, and her voice resonates with lived wisdom, creativity, and courage. In a time of extraordinary changes in work, turn here for true help.”

Mark Labberton, president, Fuller Theological Seminary

“Honestly, there aren’t many people who can actually help you make your work matter. A challenge like that requires a blend of theory, theology, and pragmatism. Most people have expertise in just one, so too often their advice is (at best) half baked. Michaela is different. She’s an entrepreneur, practical theologian, and academic. She gets the messiness of it all and teaches us to wrestle with the possibilities. This book, like Michaela, is approachable, down to earth, and just plain helpful. Michaela, where were you when I was trying to find meaning in the junkyard?”

Roy Goble, CEO of Goble Properties; cofounder, PathLight International; author, *Junkyard Wisdom: Resisting the Whisper of Wealth in a World of Broken Parts* and *Salvaged: Leadership Lessons Pulled from the Junkyard*

“This is one of those books that ends up dog-eared, coffee-stained, and filled with scribbles in the margins. In the whitewater of a rapidly changing world of work, Michaela O’Donnell is the trusted guide you are looking for. She’ll be the first to tell you that navigating issues of work, career, vocation, identity, resilience, failure, and—yes—purpose, meaning, and success is not easy. Indeed, you are likely going to find yourself falling in and gasping for air. But this book

is part lifeline, part instruction manual, part map and compass, and a whole lot of hard-earned wisdom. At every fork in the river of your career, you will come back to it again and again.”

Tod Bolsinger, author, *Tempered Resilience: How Leaders Are Formed in the Crucible of Change*

“As a fellow laborer in the faith and work space with Michaela, I wanted to cheer out loud when I read her book, because it is such practical wisdom for the angst around ‘call’ for many workers, but especially Millennials. Her work reflects not only theological truth, but also the hard-earned wisdom that only one who has walked the path can unpack. Unsure of your work’s role in God’s redemptive story? Feeling the urge to pontificate your vocation but without a theological rudder? Look no further. Michaela’s book has come to lead you into a journey of understanding your work with God at the center.”

Missy Wallace, managing director, Global Strategic Services; Faith Work Content Specialist, Redeemer City to City

“*Make Work Matter* is surprising in many ways. Unlike so many other books on work, it is based, not just on the writer’s solid convictions, but also on research into the working lives of real people. Yet the book is also filled with astute theological insights that are presented as if from a good friend seeking wisdom rather than from an esteemed professor with all the answers. Michaela generously opens up her own life to us, inviting us into a shared process of discovery and vocational discernment. *Make Work Matter* is perfect

for folks in the early stages of figuring out their work lives. But, unexpectedly, it also speaks powerfully to older readers who are wondering about God’s callings in the third third of life.”

Mark D. Roberts, PhD, author, *Life for Leaders* and *52 Workday Prayers*; founder, De Pree Center’s Flourishing in the Third Third of Life Initiative

“We learn best through story and metaphor. Through these genres, this much-needed field guide helps us to make sense and meaning out of our daily work, how it connects with our calling (an oft-used but little-understood term), and where that fits with our identity as Christians. Theologically grounded and eminently practical, this guide is both a relief and a gift. A relief, in that it untangles and creates pathways with real tools toward clarifying and uncovering calling. A gift, in that Michaela shares her own journey and story with all its highs and lows, generously and vulnerably, to illuminate the way for those who follow behind. An intrepid journey not for the faint of heart, now one has a faithful and experienced travel partner with a backpack full of tools, insight and wisdom.”

Lisa Slayton, founder and CEO, Tamim Partners; director, CityGate, an initiative of Denver Institute for Faith and Work

“In *Make Work Matter*, Michaela O’Donnell helps us understand the delicate intersection of our work and our calling. Through interviews of others who have already navigated the journey and her own personal experience, she helps us understand that the question is not what we are going to do,

but rather who we are going to become. If you are trying to find a purpose for life and work that has meaning, *Make Work Matter* is a great place to start!”

Dee Ann Turner, vice president, Chick-fil-A, Inc. (retired);
author, *Bet on Talent* and *Crush Your Career*

“Michaela O’Donnell is the rare combination of an academic-practitioner who provides useful step-by-step guidance for how to create meaning and purpose in one’s daily work, and she does so in a style that is a genuine joy to read. Using stories from real life, O’Donnell shows that the entrepreneurial way is not only for those who start big companies but for anyone who is navigating the ever-changing world of work. *Make Work Matter* is a gift for those at the beginning of their careers, for those whose jobs are changing, for the entrepreneur starting a new venture, and for anyone asking questions about how their faith and their work can illuminate one another.”

Denise Daniels, PhD, Hudson T. Harrison Professor
of Entrepreneurship, Wheaton College

“Michaela has lived the words on these pages and writes as if she is in the room speaking right to you. If you feel stuck with no clear path forward or you want to feel liberated to be creative and take risks in this new world of work, this book is your guide. If you are eager to make your work matter and to navigate the new work landscape with new tools and clarity of vision, Michaela’s book will be a comfort and an inspiration. Michaela will meet you in what she describes as your ‘holy wrestling,’ and you will

finish this book more confident, more capable, and more courageous.”

Angela Gorrell, PhD, assistant professor of practical theology, Baylor University; author, *The Gravity of Joy: A Story of Being Lost and Found*

“With the compassion of a doting shepherd, the precision of a practical theologian, and the discerning eye of a cultural exegete, Dr. Michaela O’Donnell has gifted us with a down-to-earth book written for twenty-five-to-forty-five-year-old working Christians who find themselves smack dab in the midst of a new work world saddled with old tools and sadly ill equipped to be a world changer. Through masterful and compelling storytelling and end-of-chapter practical exercises, O’Donnell provides this age-group a blueprint for their own maturation for the path forward.”

Luke Brad Bobo, director of strategic partnerships,
Made to Flourish, Overland Park, KS

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IN A CHANGING WORLD

MICHAELA O'DONNELL, PHD



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To Dan—I am so grateful for our love.

Contents

Part One Where Do You Want to Go?

1. Name Where You're Stuck 17
2. Lean In and Let Go 39
3. Believe That You Are Called 65

Part Two Who Will You Become?

4. Walk the Entrepreneurial Way 93
5. Be Rooted in Relationships 111
6. Trust Your Creativity 125
7. Build Resilience 149

Part Three How Will You Get There?

8. Practice Empathy along the Way 175
9. Convert Empathy into Imagination 195
10. Take the Next Doable Risks 209
11. Reflect on Where You've Been 221

Notes 235

Acknowledgments 243

PART ONE

Where Do You Want to Go?

You can't really know where you are going until
you know where you have been.

Maya Angelou

Name Where You're Stuck

I met James on a crisp morning in the rec room of a dusty church. With sandy brown hair and a kind smile, he came up to introduce himself before we got started. I was there to teach a workshop on calling. He was there for the bagels.

As the workshop began and the sun started to heat our room, James transformed from a bright-eyed breakfast eater into what seemed like quite a grumpy guy. His arms were folded, and his brow was furrowed. He sat stoic for hours not saying a word. When the group talked about how we might trade the definitions of calling we'd been fed by society for a more biblical approach, James sunk lower into his chair. I really couldn't tell if he was pissed at me, at God, or at someone else. But now he was definitely angry.

Several hours into the workshop, he raised his hand. It was a small group, and the rest of us were well past the hand-raising niceties. But I was so surprised he wanted to talk that I halted midsentence and walked over to him, grabbing a chair on my way. I sat down so that we were eye to eye before I motioned for him to speak.

He opened up through what I can only describe as “rage tears” about all the unhelpful jargon he’d been fed by church leaders about “his calling.” Through gritted teeth, he talked in bursts about the enormous debt he had incurred as a law student and how he was woefully unable to fulfill his own internal expectations of being the breadwinner for his family. When I prodded a little further about how folks had contributed to his unmet expectations, he sarcastically recited a mantra that he said was spoken over him time and time again: “If it’s God’s will, it’ll be God’s bill.”

I gasped at the recklessness of who I can only assume were grown adults instilling this kind of blanketed hope in James. How dare they imply that if he sensed a call to a specific career path, God would make sure he didn’t incur any financial burden! There he was, likely hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt and rightfully hurt, rightfully angry. After his tears dried, he reassumed his posture—arms crossed and brow furrowed. As hard as it was for me to just let him be, I did. Afterward, I tiptoed toward each word I spoke lest I be added to the list of unhelpful leaders with unhelpful mantras and do further damage to his heart.

A few days later, I got an unexpected email from James. His note wasn’t long, but I’ll never forget it. He wrote to tell me how our time together had helped him get unstuck about an idea he’d been working on for years. It had helped

him unlock things about his work that he didn't even know were locked up.

Only then was I able to realize that I had witnessed something beyond anger. I had witnessed *holy wrestling*—the honest and ongoing inner tussle about whatever it is God is up to in and around us. I am convinced that his honest wrestling helped him reckon with the forces from his past that had caused him pain. And that this was key to whatever creative breakthrough he had. I'm convinced because I've seen time and time again how listening to our pain, naming where we're stuck, and doing a good bit of wrestling can set the stage for a deep and transformative journey.

My own holy wrestling started in a surprising place. As I sat crisscrossed on a wooden floor, I thumped the keys of a grey typewriter I had purchased online. My task? To enter people's personal information, box by box, into forms for the state of California. Every time my mind wandered (which was often), I thumped the wrong key. This meant I had to lift the little bar that holds the paper down, pull the form out, cover my mistake in white-out, and try again. Filling in these tedious forms was my first job out of grad school.

I'd recently spent three long, tiring years—and borrowed \$60,000—to get a master's degree. Like most of my classmates, I hoped my degree in theology would launch me into work that would “change the world” or at least feel purposeful and fulfilling. Yet there I was, doing mind-numbing data entry and about as far from changing the world as I could be. There I was, longing for more in a way that I couldn't quite name.

To complicate things further, I was newly married. Dan and I met in grad school, so lucky us—we had a pair of

newly minted (and expensive) degrees that, as it turns out, weren't very marketable in a recession. As I hit dead end after dead end with organizations I admired, I started to feel really discouraged. I was following all the career advice I'd heard along the way but still coming up short every time. It didn't take long before all my hustling gave way to said discouragement and then anxiety. And with looming bills, it felt impossible to allow myself the space my soul needed to grieve my unfulfilled expectations. So I just kept hustling.

Fairly quickly, Dan and I realized that if we wanted to love our work, it would be up to us to figure something else out—to improvise as we went. I wondered, *What sort of work should we pursue? Were we dreaming when we hoped that we could get paid and utilize our degrees at the same time? What was God really calling us to do?*

The truth I was too afraid to admit was this: I was educated but unprepared. I'd been sent into a new world of work with old tools. I felt stuck and alone—with no idea of what was next. And I didn't quite have the frameworks to understand that my work—even the most mundane parts of it—already mattered to God. *Was I asking for too much to hope for meaningful work that I loved?* In other words, I was wrestling.

When I think of wrestling, I can't help but think of Jacob—grandson of Abraham, son of Isaac and Rebekah, brother of Esau. Jacob has always felt to me like such a beautifully complex person. On the one hand, God calls him to a life of leadership before he's even born. On the other hand, Jacob lives a life of conflict, especially with his brother. In a way, Jacob's entire story seems to be marked by wrestling, a theme that comes into focus when he literally wrestles a

stranger in the middle of the night (Gen. 32:22–31). He's on the way to a potentially contentious meeting with his brother when out of fear he sends his fellow travelers on ahead. Then, when it's just Jacob and the dark night sky, we're told that he wrestles with an unknown figure all night long (there are many theories on who that stranger might be!).

Just before daylight, Jacob seems to have the upper hand on the stranger and literally demands a blessing in order to let his sparring partner free (again, Jacob is a beautifully complicated human being). But the stranger does not bless him—at least not in the way Jacob might have been hoping for. Instead, the stranger gives Jacob a *new name*. No longer will he be called Jacob, which means “trickster.” His new name is Israel, which means “God rules or preserves.”¹ God's presence in the holy wrestling transforms Jacob's identity and quite literally how he walks through the world. His assurance on the way forward is that God is with him.

We too can trust that holy wrestling will change us. It might change how we perceive ourselves or God or how we walk through the world. Whether our holy wrestling happens in the dark, through rage tears, or in the mundane thumping of typewriter keys, underneath every moment of wrestling is an invitation for some kind of transformation.

Perhaps you too are wrestling. Maybe you're like I was, and you're having a hard time finding work you love. Or maybe you're like James, and you've got so much debt that doing work you love feels like just one more luxury you can't afford.

Maybe you've wanted to change careers, but you're afraid that you're too old and that you'll be too far behind. Maybe

you never imagined yourself getting a traditional job, but you feel overwhelmed because there aren't enough models or mentors for what you want to do. Maybe you have lots of creative ideas but don't know how they go together or where to start.

Maybe you're trying to balance kids and a career. But because there's too much to do and too much to pay for, you wind up feeling guilty about everything. Maybe you're tired and overwhelmed, and you just need a break.

Maybe it's not so much that something is wrong in your work but that you're exhausted by the relentless pace of change in the world. Your heart and mind are jostled by how fast the world is moving and how all that change creates new demands for you and your work.

As part of your wrestling, maybe you're also holding on to hope—believing that God is near and trustworthy and that you too are named and called and welcomed into the work of God in this world.

New World, Old Tools

We don't make our way to the meaningful work we crave without a bit of holy wrestling. We need to outfit ourselves with the tools to do this deep work. Because change is happening so fast, most of us are perpetually living and working in a new world with old tools. This requires us to both reevaluate old tools that have worked well for generations and invest in new tools suited for navigating change. In order to build a new toolkit, we have to start with naming why the old one no longer works. The last thing we want to do is replace outdated tools with unhelpful ones.

Start by thinking about why there are fewer places where people can count on steady and long-term work. Consider that even as recently as a generation ago, it was common for people to stay with a company or in an industry for the duration of their careers. Young farmers became old farmers. Junior executives became senior ones. Teachers sometimes stayed with schools for thirty years. But today, the average person changes jobs many times.² And the number of people active in the independent economy has more than tripled in the last two decades.³ Why is it that over forty million people have some kind of side hustle, do gig work, or are working for themselves full-time?

Picture a set of well-worn paths that are eroding or perhaps even barricaded. The disappearing of seemingly well-worn paths has a lot to do with the fact that our collective relationship to knowledge has changed. Hear me out. As a society, we've moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. If the Industrial Age was a time marked by efficiency and mass production because of machines, the Information Age is a time marked by cultural disruption and digital acceleration powered by technology.

Knowledge is easier to both access and distribute than it was just a couple decades ago. Take something as simple as a recipe for banana bread. Thirty years ago, if you wanted to make banana bread for the first time, chances are you would have consulted a family member or a cookbook you owned. The information you could access came via established and predictable channels.

If you set out to make banana bread today, you have the option to consult not only family or a trusty cookbook but also the entire world. If you google "banana bread recipe,"

you are met with over 400 million relevant hits in less than a second. And because of the power of algorithms, the first several hundred hits are recipes you might actually want to try. Let's say that after reading a dozen recipes, you decide to bake a hybrid—essentially creating your own new recipe. Later, you take a picture of your creation and post it along with the recipe on social media using #bananabread. Now any number of people you've never met have access to your knowledge and can make the bread you invented.

As our ways of knowing have diversified, how we conceptualize and access work has been disrupted. Instead of a fixed set of well-worn career paths, we now have seemingly limitless opportunities. Some of the same jobs remain, but the paths toward them feel different. Plus, there are so many new ways to make a living than there were just a decade ago. As with making banana bread, it is now up to individuals to piece together something that works for them.

Beyond just how we access work, diversified knowledge streams have impacted how we do our work, what we work on, and who we work with. Consider the apps or platforms you use that weren't invented ten years ago. Consider the projects you've worked on in the last year and all the different skills you had to have to do so. And consider how an increasingly diverse workforce changes everything. From an aging population to transnational companies to the shifting ethnic demographics of the population of America, chances are that you're working in less homogeneous groups than the workers of thirty years ago. These shifts make work more complex (and more wonderful and more like the kingdom of God!). A more diverse workforce makes the inequities that are still so deeply ingrained in our society feel both increas-

ingly more noticeable and less tolerable in our workplaces. As a result, some companies are rightly reckoning with racial and gender equity in their ranks and practices. Interestingly, that reckoning is often not coming from the center of an organization. In other words, it's not happening on a well-worn path. No, the reckoning is coming largely through decentralized yet interconnected, well-organized individuals on the margins. Knowledge feels flipped inside out.

At the heart of all this disruption is a shift in what I'll call the *burden of responsibility*. When knowledge is centralized, the implicit burden of responsibility for making sure the world and the economy work is largely on the places that presumed to hold that knowledge—educational institutions, government, big systems, and corporations. The results were well-worn pathways in and out of those centers and guides who knew the way. But as our relationship with knowledge has changed and when knowledge feels flipped inside out, we're forced to wrestle with what was once assumed. When this happens, sometimes the center grasps for power and life and fights back against the new ways of doing things. Other times, the center fractures and disintegrates. Still other times, there's a blending of the old and the new. Whatever the case, we are—in real time—synthesizing knowledge from a variety of sources so that we can go where no path yet exists! If you ever feel as if you're just sort of making it up as you go, know that you're not alone. We're all in this shift together.

It's not only information that's more accessible. It's people too. Technology has made our greatest resource as a species—ourselves—feel constantly available. As a result, we live in an *always-on, on-demand* culture. Think about what this means for expectations and boundaries between

work and the rest of our lives. They start to get blurry fast, especially if a portion of our work happens on a computer or via email—the same places from which we send texts to our friends or look at pictures of our families. Thirty years ago, if someone worked in an office environment, they were largely out of reach after hours. A nine-to-five job was just that. But today, when the average person checks their smartphone a hundred times a day, it's harder to distinguish if and when we're truly unplugged.

It's no surprise, then, that our always-on, on-demand way of being has given birth to *hustle culture*. As a culture, we reward accomplishments and ambition. That's not all bad, of course. In fact, hustle can be an agent of good. But when the collective speak is that every goal we meet was worth whatever it took to get there, things get problematic. It's painful for me to admit how often I've found myself buying into hyped-up hustle as a viable path forward, how often I've abused my own energy in the name of accomplishments, progress, and meaningful work.

Now consider the way the West prepares its citizens for work and if the tools we need today are prioritized in our spaces for formal learning: Do we prioritize preparing people for continuous change and ambiguity? Do we work to cultivate resilience and creativity above all else in the classroom? Do we encourage experimentation with skills such as empathy and risk-taking as means for career exploration? Do we teach people to mitigate pressures to unhealthy hustle in an on-demand world?

As an educator myself, I can say that it's been nearly impossible to keep up with the rate of change in the world and to apply it fully to lessons in the classroom. Partly, this

is because our educational systems are built around fixed milestones, reflecting the former era where pathways into work were clearer and more well established. Starting in kindergarten, young minds progress through different phases of education—elementary, middle, and high school, and eventually college. In every phase, there are clear goals that define the progression. The gifts of humans we call teachers are charged with helping students to reach these milestones of success. The measures we're all aiming for are set in place by schools and districts, government, and accreditation boards at various points. It's almost as if we're on an assembly line.

One of the central goals of this assembly line is to adequately prepare us for the workforce. The assumption of the well-worn path is that checking certain boxes sets us up to contribute meaningfully and productively to society. Up until fairly recently, this assembly line would pop out workers, ready to take their places in the industries of America—industries such as business, manufacturing, education, retail, health care, entertainment, and government.

But today, because the world is changing faster than education can keep up with, there's a gap between our education and preparation for work. Closing this gap is the work that now undergirds all the rest of our work. We won't solve all this at once or all by ourselves. Just when we adopt and adapt to this new world of work, it's bound to change again.

The New World of Work Is, Well . . . a Lot

The primary characteristic of this new world of work is change. When we experience change, we experience loss.

When we experience loss, we should grieve. As I sat there on my living room floor, filling in forms on a typewriter, I had no playbook for the way forward. *What was I even doing with my life?* I was tired from all the fruitless hustling. I was burned out because I felt as if the system wasn't working for me. I was discouraged about the gap between where I was and where I wanted to be. And I felt paralyzed when I tried to imagine my next steps. I wonder if you too have experienced symptoms that reveal the new world of work is taking a toll on you, such as feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or lonely. These are, of course, just three. You might create your own list or build on this one as you go.

Symptom #1: You're Feeling Overwhelmed

Working in an on-demand world is overwhelming. Lacking guides is overwhelming. Adapting to changing technologies, new expectations, and new relationships is overwhelming. Feeling like certainty is always just out of reach is overwhelming. Yet here we are, feeling like it's up to us to figure out our own way forward. And work is a big deal for us—partly because we need money to live and partly because it's been deemed a vehicle for our self-expression and significance. Turns out, that's a lot of pressure to put on our work—and on ourselves.⁴

The feeling of overwhelm can show up in different ways. In the groups and classes I lead, I ask people to put images to their feelings of overwhelm. One person described the chronic tension she carries in her jaw because of all of her work stress. Another described himself stuck in quicksand because he felt paralyzed about how to take steps toward his dreams. Still another person had us picture with him a deep

hole in the earth—which represented the pit of self-doubt he feels when he's overwhelmed and depressed.

When I get overwhelmed, I feel overstimulated. The image I share with groups is that of a hamster on a wheel. When I'm operating out of my least healthy self, I respond to overstimulation by dialing up my hustle. This, as you might guess, is not actually a great antidote to feeling overwhelmed and in fact yields a lot more stuff I have to deal with.

Even though I know better, when life feels so full and each thing I'm doing feels valuable, I let the messages of hustle culture guide me. They tell me to power through—that I don't have the margin to slow down and that I don't have time to rest. I quite literally ignore the signals my body sends me about needing water and food and sleep. When this happens, I find myself working at two in the morning, skipping meals, and anxiously checking my phone all the time. Let me tell you, I have never once been proud of something I've produced when I've ignored the needs of my body. And my body has never once thanked me for powering through.

How do you deal with feeling overwhelmed? Do you get depressed and find it hard to keep going? Do you withdraw from others? Do you find some sort of an escape? Do you dial up your hustle? Do you set boundaries with your phone or work email? Do you spend time with people who are energizing? Do you care for yourself with a long walk or a day of rest? Again, if you're feeling overwhelmed by the changes in our world, know that you're not alone.

Symptom #2: You're Feeling Anxious

In its most basic form, anxiety is fear about what might happen in the future. We can feel anxious for many reasons,

including when we feel as though we don't have enough information about a situation. Remember Thomas, the disciple who just couldn't believe that Jesus had been resurrected until he had more information? Until he could poke the places where Jesus had been nailed to the cross (John 20:24–29)? Maybe Thomas was just anxious.

Anxiety isn't all bad. It can actually be a healthy human response to unknown circumstances, helping us notice threats and make decisions. But as the world is accelerating and becoming less and less predictable, it's too much for our brains to handle. When we're anxious about work and also about climate change or politics or stuff going on in our families, we become exponentially anxious—each anxiety-producing thought feeding off one another. Our brains and hearts are taking in more than they were meant to. And we must be on the lookout for how quickly healthy anxiety morphs into unproductive and debilitating fear, limiting our capacity to function and flourish.

In a world that demands so much from individuals, the message is that we are to be the heroes of our own stories, that we alone have to gather all the information. What's more, in the name of opportunity, we're even told that we can achieve anything we set our minds to—we can be anything we dream! Limitless possibilities and the responsibility to ensure they all come to fruition are an extraordinary amount of pressure for one person. Also, what this tragically means is that if everything goes wrong, there's no one but ourselves to blame.

We all have our own triggers for worry: money, relationships, happiness. One of the places I find myself getting anxious is something I affectionately call *the gap*. The gap is

the space between where I am and where I want to be in my career. When Dan and I first started our creative agency, the gap felt all-consuming. In those early days, we worked out of our dining room. We lived on cheap takeout and boxed macaroni and cheese. We often worked until nine or ten at night, putting in the hard work it takes to build a business. As much as I loved that process of building our business, if I'm honest, part of what motivated my hard work was my anxiety about closing the gap.

My anxiety about the gap (and my lack of naming my feelings!) made it hard to enjoy what was going well. I'd hear of a client someone else landed and my first response would be to feel a hot pang of envy. Or I'd hear of a promotion a friend got, and I'd feel both happy and jealous that she was succeeding at a faster rate than I was. I was so focused on myself that I couldn't celebrate what God was doing in others.

As the world of work continues to change, there will be more unknowns. Part of your work is to be able to identify and name your anxiety. Consider when your heart rate goes up, the tension in your shoulders feels pronounced, or your stomach feels tight. Maybe you replay conversations that you're worried about. Or maybe you find yourself putting off a task because you're dreading an unknown outcome.⁵ With so much going on, it's understandable that you're anxious.

Symptom #3: You're Feeling Lonely

The “you're on your own” vibe that undergirds our new world is exhausting. It's unpredictable and chaotic. It's scary. And at times, it's lonely.

At the end of this chapter you will have an opportunity to name your own symptoms in the form of frustrations and

then to consider what they reveal about what you're longing for. Let me tell you now that one of the most common frustrations—or pain points—I hear people name in some form or another is loneliness. People feel isolated in their work for various reasons: relational issues, remote work, economic instability, and inequitable systems.

I'd like to tease out inequitable systems a bit, mostly because I think it impacts nearly everything else. In America, it's probably no surprise that our systems are built to privilege some and alienate others. That doesn't mean that the people who benefit are bad people per se, but that the rules don't favor everyone equally. Even when as a society we feel as though we're past realities like racism and sexism and any other ism, issues surface that make it clear we've got a long way to go. Yet as we shift into an era marked by the democratization of knowledge, rise in independent work, and diversification of our workforce, inequitable systems feel not only all the more inequitable but also as if maybe their days are increasingly limited.

When I graduated with my doctorate, I did so alongside eight men. As part of the ceremony, each person stood up and gave a short speech. Nearly every man expressed heartfelt gratitude through tears to his family for the time they sacrificed being with him while he completed the doctoral process.

When it was my turn to speak, I turned my shoulders so that I was looking straight at my then two-year-old daughter. As I gently said her name, she stopped playing with the doll in her hand. I spoke to her as if we were the only two in the room. Through my own mounting tears, I whispered, "Evelyn, someday I will tell you the story of how I wrote a

dissertation while you slept.” Though I hadn’t planned to make a point about patriarchy and how it played a role in the obvious gender imbalance on stage that day, that is what ended up happening.

Why did my story sound so different from my colleagues? Because whenever possible, I chose not to sacrifice time with my kid but instead my own sleep—my own well-being. I did so not because I am an especially self-sacrificial person but because I was playing by the rules of patriarchy. In a patriarchal system, one of the central ways we make sense of male identity (and therefore assess the value of a man) is in relation to their role as workers. If a man has a good job (or in the new world of work, good *jobs!*) and provides financially for a family (if he has one), society thinks positively of that man. One way that as a society we express value for male identity through work is that we deem it acceptable for families to make sacrifices for Dad’s work.

On the flip side, one of the primary ways patriarchy assesses a woman’s value is in relation to her role as a wife and mother. The underlying message so many women get is that it’s great if we work as long as it doesn’t interfere with our other roles too much. This is why I probably missed out on hundreds of hours of sleep. And don’t get me wrong, I love my kid (now kids). But if I’m honest, part of the reason I sacrificed my sleep instead of my time with her was guilt. Guilt that I wasn’t being the mom she needed, and guilt that I wasn’t a superpowered mom who could play by the rules of patriarchy and break them at the same time. Goodness, did that make me feel lonely.

Many of us are lonely and believe we have to hide it. We’re physically drained and literally tired, like I was, but we’re

also guilt-ridden, worried, and potentially despairing without any companions to share with or help. We're wondering what and who we can trust in this unpredictable world.

Overwhelmed. Anxious. Lonely. It's a lot.

Whatever our symptoms are, left untended they can affect our health, our relationships, and our emotional well-being. This is what happened to my friend Sarah. Sarah is one of the most talented graphic designers I know. She has a thriving studio where she prides herself on subverting the hustle and embracing a slower pace. But this wasn't always the case. Her journey to get there was a traumatic one. I've heard her tell the story of her tipping point many times.

Years ago, Sarah crouched hidden under her office desk on the fifth floor of a downtown skyscraper. It was the third night in a month she'd had to sleep at work to meet a project deadline. Life as a junior architect was not unfolding as she had imagined. Fresh out of school, she dreamed of making cities beautiful. Instead, she found herself working insane hours on projects such as shopping malls and parking structures and under immense pressure to hustle. That particular morning, she found herself on the floor because she felt stuck; she wanted out but didn't have any idea what she'd do next.

After her third wave of tears had passed, she crawled out from under her desk and made a beeline to her boss's office. She quit in bursts, partly apologizing and partly trying to find words to convey just how much pressure she was under. It had become too much. The rules of success in that system just didn't work for her.

As she was explaining things to her boss, she had the growing sense that she was leaving not only her job at the firm

but also her career as an architect. Yet she had been so sure that God had called her to this work. She walked out partly relieved and partly anxious—totally burned out but also certain that whatever she did next needed to not make her feel so horrible.

If we don't name the symptoms—and their root causes—that reveal the new world of work is taking a toll on us, it'll cost us things we can't afford to give. It'll cost us our health. It'll hurt our relationships. And we'll have a hard time making our way toward the work that God indeed calls us to do.

Build a New Toolkit

Even in the midst of so much overwhelm, many of us remain curious. Hopeful. Expectant. We sense deep down that God is calling us to lives of meaning and purpose. So we need tools that help us seek God in the wrestling, navigate change, discern next steps, and at the same time earn a paycheck to pay for life.

After enough time sitting on the floor filling in those forms, my husband and I started our own branding and video company. A few years into that work, I found myself curious to know more about people who had figured out how to achieve success in the midst of a changing world. I was still running my business but also working on my PhD. The time had come for me to name what I was going to study, and it was these questions about work and calling that I gravitated toward.

I took my research findings and paired them with theological reflection to come up with a set of tools that people can use in order to discover more about themselves, God's callings, and their work. But it wasn't enough to have a

theoretical method for how this might work. So I've spent the years since finishing my degree testing the tools with hundreds of people in lab-like classrooms, workshops, retreats, small groups, and coaching sessions. Like any process, testing helped me iterate the tools—removing what wasn't helpful and clarifying what was.

Whether you're hoping to move from stuck to unstuck, be liberated to take new risks, or discover deeper truths about what God has for you, I trust that there's something in this book and in these tools for you. We're all on a journey, through which we are indeed invited to join God in changing the world and along the way be changed ourselves.

Think of this book like a map. As you read it, you'll *do the work you need to do* and lay aside the rest. My hope is that the stories, data, and theological frameworks will help you to do the following:

1. Define where you are in this season of work
2. Embrace what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about calling
3. Develop a mindset and habits suited for a new world of work
4. Reflect on and work out ways that sustain you for the journey

You're here—in this book and in this season of your life—to do the work you need to do. I wholeheartedly believe that many of our paths toward meaningful work start with our honest reflection with both God and ourselves. While we might want quick fixes or step-by-step solutions, wrestling

is rarely prescriptive. My hope is that you'll consider trading a life powered by hustle or filled with anxiety for one with healthy rhythms of reflection and rest. That you'll be able to embrace your own limits as you lean into praising a limitless God. And that you'll trust that you are indeed named and called and welcomed into the work of God in the world.

EXERCISE: Name Where You're Stuck

Journal or reflect on the following questions:

1. Consider your pain points in work. Where do you feel frustrated, disappointed, or overwhelmed?
2. What do these reveal about what you're wrestling with?
3. What does what you're wrestling with reveal about what you're longing for?