

THE BIG IDEAS

Noble vs. Heroic

Let's define noble purpose.

Ultimate Purpose Formula

What you love + What world needs.

Cultivating Noble Purpose

Nine tips to rock it.

"Sic Transit Gloria"

All glory is fleeting. Stay humble.

True Happiness

Comes via character + purpose.

Noble Purpose

The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life

BY WILLIAM DAMON · TEMPLETON FOUNDATION PRESS © 2003 · 098 PAGES

"The examples above—cooking eggs, making golf putts, driving home through storms—are absorbing but transient experiences that people may engage in from time to time. But can you imagine living your whole life with that kind of focus? All of us have that choice. To live in this way means finding large-scale *purposes* that concentrate your talents, skills, thoughts, and energies in an enduring manner. It means finding something that you truly believe in, something so worth accomplishing that you dedicate yourself to it wholeheartedly, without qualm or self-interest. It means devoting yourself to a cause, or to many causes, that you consider *noble purposes*."

~ William Damon from *Noble Purpose*

Noble purpose.

It's all about "*finding something that you truly believe in, something so worth accomplishing that you dedicate yourself to it wholeheartedly, without qualm or self-interest.*"

Helping us discovering and live our noble purposes is, of course, what this book is all about.

I was introduced to William Damon and his work via Angela Duckworth's [Grit](#). William is one of the world's leading scientists studying human development and the psychology of morality. <—Awesome.

This is a tiny little book that is incredibly inspiring. (Get a copy [here](#).) It's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share a few of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

P.S. If you haven't checked out Purpose 101 and the other Notes on purpose, cruise on over [here](#) to do so.

NOBLE VS. HEROIC: LET'S DEFINE A NOBLE PURPOSE

"Noble does not always mean 'heroic,' if we take 'heroic' to mean pursuing daring, life-endangering adventures, like the mythical knights who fought dragons in days of yore. Noble purpose *can* mean this, and our history books are full of dramatic accounts of courageous acts that saved the day. But noble purpose also may be found in the day-to-day fabric of ordinary existence. A mother caring for her child, a teacher instructing students, a doctor healing patients, a citizen campaigning for a candidate for the sake of improving society—all are pursuing noble purposes. So, too, are the legions of people who dedicate time, care, effort, and worldly goods to charity, to their friends and family, to their communities, and to God."

Let's start by making it clear that "noble" doesn't necessarily mean the "heroic" idea of mythical knights battling mythical dragons.

Those types of courageous acts are awesome and can, of course, be both noble and heroic. But we don't need to go off on that mythical journey to engage in deeply noble purposes—our day-to-day lives provide all the opportunities we need.

"One needs something to believe in, something for which one can have wholehearted enthusiasm. One needs to feel that one's life has meaning, that one is needed in the world."

~ Hannah Senesh

*"Have a purpose in life, and
throw yourself into your
work with all the strength of
mind and muscle as God has
given."*

~ Thomas Carlyle

Alexandra makes this point in [Mommahood 101](#) where she describes being a mom as "Holy Work." Committing a huge chunk of your life to raising a healthy, vibrant, flourishing child is a noble purpose.

As Damon says: "A noble purpose also may be found in the day-to-day fabric of ordinary existence. A mother caring for her child, a teacher instructing students, a doctor healing patients, a citizen campaigning for a candidate for the sake of improving society—all are pursuing noble purposes. So, too, are the legions of people who dedicate time, care, effort, and worldly goods to charity, to their friends and family, to their communities, and to God."

How does it show up for YOU in your life?!

btw: William tells us that purpose is scientifically defined like this: "Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self."

While Angela Duckworth puts it this way: "In my 'grit lexicon,' therefore, purpose means 'the intention to contribute to the well-being of others.'"

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE FORMULA

"The idea of a 'calling' is an ancient notion with religious roots. Max Weber wrote that a calling is a 'task set by God.' All individuals have their own particular callings, reflecting three realities: (1) their own God-given abilities; (2) the world's need for the services their callings provide; and (3) their enjoyment in serving society and God in their own special ways. Much like any noble purpose, a calling is both meaningful to the self and important to the world beyond the self. Christian theologian Frederick Buechner writes, "The kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

As I was typing that quote I said to myself, "Buechner... Buechner... where did we just talk about Buechner?"

Then I remembered we shared a slight variation of the same wisdom in [The Road to Character](#) where David Brooks tells us: "In this method, you don't ask, What do I want from life? You ask a different set of questions: What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?"

In this scheme of things we don't create our lives; we are summoned by life. The important answers are not found inside, they are found outside. This perspective begins not within the autonomous self, but with the concrete circumstances in which you happen to be embedded. This perspective begins with an awareness that the world existed long before you and will last long after you, and that in the brief span of your life you have been thrown by fate, by history, by chance, by evolution, or by God into a specific place with specific problems and needs. Your job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed? As the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, 'At what points do my talents and deep gladness meet the world's deep need?'"

So, as we've discussed many times, if we want to find our calling, we'd be wise to look at the nexus of (1) our "God-given abilities" + (2) the world's needs + (3) our enjoyment in using those skills in service to the world.

In short: where (1) what we most love to do meets (2) what the world most needs.

Where is that for you?

*"Everyone can be great,
because everyone can serve."*

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

*"The secret of success is
constancy of purpose."*

~ Benjamin Disraeli

I love to do this: _____.

This is what the world needs from me: _____.

(For me? I love to read/study/embody wisdom. The world needs more wisdom in less time. Therefore, I'll dedicate my life to helping people optimize.)

P.S. Remember that ANY job can become a calling. It's all in how you approach it.

In *Authentic Happiness* ([see Notes](#)), Martin Seligman puts it this way: "any job can become a calling, and any calling can become a job. A physician who views the work as a Job and is simply interested in making a good income does not have a Calling, while a garbage collector who sees the work as making the world a cleaner, healthier place could have a Calling."

CULTIVATING NOBLE PURPOSE

"How can you cultivate noble purpose in your own life? Where do you find it, and how can you be sure that this is the right way to spend your time and energy?"

You can start by impressing upon yourself how important it is to pursue a purpose. The case for purpose that I have made in this little book is substantiated by centuries of scientific and religious writings. Dedicating yourself to a noble purpose not only is beneficial to the world that needs your gifts, it is also essential for your own mental and spiritual health. Remind yourself of this well-documented bit of wisdom daily, and stay determined to do something about it."

How do we cultivate noble purpose in our lives?

Step 1 is, as always, starting with remembering WHY—in this case, knowing that finding and expressing a deep purpose is essential to your own mental and spiritual well-being.

From there, William gives us nine tips on how to cultivate our purpose.

Here's a quick look at them:

1. "It is never too early to begin a life of purpose—and it is never too late."

Young ones: Now's the time to begin exploring your deepest purpose!! Those on the other end of the life-experience spectrum: Keep in mind this wisdom Stephen Covey shared at the end of his life ([see Notes](#) on *Primary Greatness*): "Q: You have said that your most important final message is to live life in crescendo. What does that mean?"

A: It means that the most important work you will ever do is always ahead of you. It is never behind you. You should always be expanding and deepening your commitment to that work. Retirement is a false concept. You may retire from a job, but never retire from meaningful projects and contributions.

Crescendo is a musical term. It means to play music with ever greater energy and volume, with strength and striving. The opposite is diminuendo, which means to lower the volume, to back off, to play it safe, to become passive, to whimper away your life.

So live life in crescendo. It's essential to live with that thought. Regardless of what you have or haven't accomplished, you have important contributions to make. Avoid the temptation to keep looking in the rearview mirror at what you have done and instead look ahead with optimism."

2. "Although purpose is everywhere, it may be most readily found in places that are familiar to you."

Before you go out on that far-off hero's journey to a new land, you may want to pause and check in to see if your deepest noble purpose is right under your feet!

*"Nothing contributes so
much to tranquilizing the
mind as a steady purpose—a
point on which the soul may
fix its intellectual eye."*

~ Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

"One thing I know: The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve."

~ Albert Schweitzer

3. "Look around for mentors—'purpose exemplars'—people who represent models of noble behavior in service of good causes."

Who inspires you? Look around and read up on figures with the noble attributes you aspire to possess!

And keep this wisdom from Marcus Aurelius in mind ([see Notes](#) on *Meditations*): "Because a thing is difficult for you, do not therefore suppose it beyond mortal power. On the contrary, if anything is possible and proper for a man to do, assume that it must fall within your own capacity."

4. "When possible, get support from like-minded individuals."

Reminds me of Angela Duckworth's wisdom from [Grit](#) where she tells us: "The bottom line on culture and grit is: If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you're a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture."

In fact, she tells us that the fastest way to boost your grit is to join a gritty culture—your natural desire to conform in a healthy way will step up your game immediately. (This inspires me to tap into another facet of my purpose to create a community of people passionate about optimizing their lives. More on this soon...)

5. "Be prepared for occasional disillusionment, and resist it mightily. Anyone who harbors a lofty goal inevitably will fall short of completely attaining it."

If we're stretching toward a noble goal, we WILL experience trips and falls. Be prepared for them. And get up, dust yourself off, and get back to work.

Let's be anti-fragile [Confidence 101](#)-style as we KNOW that we can handle whatever life throws at us and get stronger with each challenge we face.

6. "Stay humble. When passion for a noble purpose turns into self-righteousness, we lose our capacity to learn from our mistakes or even to notice when we are making mistakes."

Humility.

It's Virtue #1 in pursuit of character + noble purposes. It's also the #1 antidote to Vice #1: Pride.

If we don't have the humility to see where we're falling short, we won't have the clarity needed to optimize so we can actualize.

Where are you falling short? What simple things can you do to step it up 1%?

7. "Be sure that your purpose stays noble by paying attention not only to the ends that you seek but also to the means by which you pursue it."

This is an important point William comes back to again and again. To be truly noble, our end (our What?) must be noble AND our means (our How?) must be noble. Are yours?

8. "Celebrate your purpose, and be grateful for it."

William tells us that our purpose is a "double gift": The world receives the benefit of us giving our gifts to the world AND we receive the gift of a fully charged life of meaning. Celebrate that. Be grateful. It's a true blessing.

9. "Pass on your purpose to others, especially to the young. Set up apprenticeships. Get young people engaged in the noble causes that inspire you."

If we want to change the world, we need to get the next generation involved and show them what's possible.

... Nine ways to cultivate our purpose.

"The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder-waif, a nothing, a no man. Have a purpose in life, and, having it, throw such strength of mind and muscle into your work as God has given you."

~ Thomas Carlyle

What's your favorite?

How can you put it into practice more today?

“SIC TRANSIT GLORIA” ← ADVISOR WHISPERS IN YOUR EAR...

“Character is that which reveals moral purpose.”

~ Aristotle

“When passion for a noble purpose turns into self-righteousness, we lose our capacity to learn from our mistakes or even to notice when we are making mistakes. We must always be on guard to make sure that the justifiable satisfaction that we earn with a life of purpose does not become pridefulness, which has long been recognized, for good reason, as a deadly sin (some would say *the* most deadly sin). Pride harms us, harms those we are trying to help, and ultimately harms the purpose that we are trying to accomplish. The only way to avoid this constant danger is to keep a healthy perspective on ourselves. Although everything we do in this world matters, and our lives are of great consequence to ourselves and to others, as individuals we are of limited importance in the larger scheme of things. This applies even to the most exalted people on the planet. In the glory days of the Roman Empire, the emperor was assigned an ‘advisor’ to sit alongside him in his chariot when he rode along to the lusty cheers of his revering throngs. The advisor would whisper ‘sic transit gloria’ in the emperor’s ear—‘All glory is fleeting.’ Often I have wished that someone would supply this special service to each of us daily.”

Humility.

As discussed, it's virtue #1 and the antidote to vice #1: Pride.

I just love that image of a Roman Emperor being reminded of his own microscopically tiny place in the world and that even his seemingly infinite glory is fleeting.

Couldn't we all use such an advisor in times of pride? :)

So, moral of the story: Although passion for life and our purpose is wonderful, we want to remember Aristotle's virtuous mean and not get *too* passionate lest our passion turns into pridefulness + self-righteousness.

(As a recovering vegangelical, I am well-versed in the practice of being *just a little* too self-righteous (or a lot—hah!). I try to remember to sprinkle more humility and less dogma into my approach these days.)

→ Too little passion (a vice of deficiency) = apathy.

→ Too much passion (a vice of excess) = pridefulness/self-righteousness.

→ *Just* the right amount of passion tempered with humility? That's what we're looking for.

The next time we feel a little too much pride + passion, let's remember that Roman advisor whispering in our ears to settle down.

All glory is fleeting.

Let's be humble.

P.S. I love Ryan Holiday's take in [Ego Is the Enemy](#) where he playfully tells us to forget passion altogether in a chapter aptly titled: “Don't Be Passionate.” (See Notes + Micro Class for more. :)

WHAT BRINGS TRUE HAPPINESS

“Psychologists who study happiness repeatedly discover a puzzling paradox: the happiest people are those who pay little attention to the goal of becoming happy. Many of the things that we strive for in order to become happy seem to have little to do with it. Affluence, for example, is not strongly related to happiness except in cases of severe deprivation, where more assets are needed to gain basic levels of food, shelter, and family well-being. Status, glory, and other advantages

"Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."

~ Helen Keller

that we avidly seek do not reliably make us any happier than we were before we acquired these treasures—any boosts in mood that they create usually prove temporary, wearing off soon after the initial glow of self-congratulation. What *does* matter is engaging in something that you find absorbing, challenging, and compelling. A noble purpose is a prime example of something that brings great personal satisfaction by bringing us outside ourselves into activities that capture our imaginations and promote the causes we believe in.

The paradox is that hard and often thankless effort in service of a noble purpose, with little thought of personal gain, is a surer path to happiness than the eager pursuit of happiness for its own sake. Self-indulgence simply does not work. We end up feeling empty and resentful and not at all indulged, because we have failed to satisfy our truest and deepest desires: the universal yearning for a life with meaning."

We THINK that all the shiny things life throws at us will make us happy—the beach body + huge house + our faces on the covers of every magazine.

But, alas, those *extrinsic* markers of success just *don't* bring us sustainable happiness.

As Viktor Frankl tells us: Don't go after happiness; rather, commit yourself to something bigger than yourself and let happiness come chasing after you.

Of course, this is easier said than done in today's "Big Me" culture—which makes it even more essential for us to go after primary greatness as we walk the road to character in gritty commitment to our noble purposes.

With love and gratitude for your support in helping me do my work as we strive together to optimize and actualize and give our gifts most fully to the world,

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.