

Finding the Job of Your Life

by Gianpiero Petriglieri

Let's face it. We all think about it. At times we think of little else — even if only rarely and in certain settings do we feel free to admit it. The conversation often begins furtively, the question murmured as if slightly shameful or out of place. How can I get more of it at work?

Meaning, that is.

Meaning at work, in work, from work. Despite work even. Meaningful work. However you put it, we crave meaning more than ever.

It may be because we are freer. If we're fed up of **soulless work** we are told to take charge of our career, find our vision and **carve our own path**. But what if we can't see clearly? What if a path that looks promising actually leads nowhere?

It may be because we are too focused or not focused enough. We feel stuck on a narrow path and we wonder what lies beyond it. Or we hop between jobs without commitment or a clear direction.

It may be because we are more exposed. Courses, networking events and social media may not open so many doors but they provide plenty of windows — into a myriad of new neighbors' lawns whose grass often looks greener. Take Facebook. Everyone has fulfilling lives there. Their colleagues are helpful and fun, their partners attractive and caring, their travels exotic and food delicious. Their glasses are full. Children always smile and never have tantrums.

Someone always seems to be pulling it off. Whatever 'it' is. So why aren't we?

The more we reach for meaning, the more elusive it becomes. Interrogating its nature, what it may look and feel like, makes it more mysterious. Thinking about meaning only deepens our longing.

When you look at it that way, meaning is like love.

Yearning for either turns some into poets and drives the rest of us on a quest to experience it.

But when it comes to love, most grown-ups realize what that quest will take.

We long ago gave up the fantasy that a Prince or Princess Charming will show up one day to sweep us off our feet. We know that finding love takes more than hopeful waiting. It takes building a relationship with somebody to share love with.

Love, the sentiment, is a consequence of having found our somebody. It begins when our desire for love morphs into desire for a person. In fact, when we are in love we may not even think much about our desire for love. We're too busy doing what lovers do — holding hands, writing letters, promising, being consumed and scared and comforted, raising children, fighting, making up, making out, having a laugh.

When it comes to meaning, however, many grown-ups still believe in a version of the handsome prince and perky princess.

We call them "**dream job**" or "fulfilling life" and imagine them to be out there — at the other end of the marshes of torment, waiting for us to wade through a forest of doubts. Ready to understand us perfectly and delight us ever after.

That very belief keeps us **confused** and stuck.

Meaning, like love, is **a consequence**. Not a destination. It is the sentiment we experience, usually in passing, when we're engaged with activities, people, or **purposes** that keep us busy and make us feel alive. It is not the big warm light at the end of the tunnel. It is the tiny LED that signals "life is ON."

If meaning is what we seek, then, the best we can do is to find something so engaging that we stop thinking of meaning. How? The same way most of us go about finding our somebody when we are looking for love.

Yes, fantasizing, getting advice, and taking to the Internet are all well and good. But sooner or later you have to play the awkward, exciting, unpredictable game.

Dating.

In **her landmark study of career transitions**, Herminia Ibarra echoes the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips' view that **flirtation** — a form of experimentation suspended between imagination and commitment — is the royal road to explore potential interests and discover who we are, not only when it comes to romance.

On a first date you rarely ask yourself, "Is he or she the one?" Ok, maybe you do, and you might be able to tell if someone isn't. But you are more likely to wonder, "**Is this going any further?**" or more precisely, whether and how you would like it to. The latter question is far more useful, for three reasons.

It is (more) answerable. It is impossible to know in advance if a job you are considering will be meaningful. You can tell if it is attractive, which does not hurt — but this offers little real guidance. It is possible, however, to sense from a project, an internship or even just a meal with potential colleagues if that attractive job may be worth pursuing further.

It reveals what you want (and what you are prepared to give). Considering a concrete option, as opposed to a fantasy, puts your expectations to the test of reality. If you went further, what might you have to invest, rearrange, give up? What would you want and fear? How much work are you prepared to put in to make it work?

It exposes you (or makes you withdraw). It is impossible to love and learn without making ourselves vulnerable. To rejection, hurt, disillusionment or exploitation. To surprise, affection, understanding and transformation. Dating won't help you assess those risks and opportunities accurately, let alone prevent them, but it gives you a chance to entertain them and maybe take the plunge.

Any job, like any relationship, brings out some parts of yourself and demands that you put others aside. At best, they free you to express more of who you want to be. At worst, they make you feel unsafe. When flirting with a job, you may feel freed up or want to shut down. That is a sign of how the job may change you.

There are as many kinds of meaning as there are kinds of love. Claiming and liberating us at the same time, both elicit the full range of feelings that come with being alive. Our "meaning lives" are as complex and messy as our "love lives." Both can be frustrating at times and gratifying at others. In fact, it is the possibility of experiencing a broad range of feelings, in relation to someone or something that matters, that makes them meaningful.

A meaningful job has boring moments, scary moments, angry moments. It is not a flat line of unvarying personal fulfillment. Nothing is great if it is monotone. There is no job of your life out there, waiting to be found. There are only jobs that may make you feel more or less alive. If you allow them to, that is.