The *Joy* of Being Happier

Finding Your Life's Work Beyond the Corporate Climb

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The Sunday question

There's a version of Sunday dinner where you're home and already at work. Someone asks you a question. You say, "Sorry, what?" for the second time. In your head, you're explaining a budget shortfall to people who won't be in the room with you until ten tomorrow.

Maybe you like those people. Maybe you fought hard for the seat you have. You can be proud of everything it took to get there and still wonder how many more Sunday dinners you want to spend that way.

Here's the question I'd put on the table. If the promotion came through tomorrow, would you want the life that came with it?

And if your company has already made a decision about your future, let me ask it another way. When you picture having your old job back, which parts do you actually want back?

I chose the word *happier* because it leaves room for an honest answer. You can miss your team, worry about money, and still discover that you love having breakfast with the person you married. A change that small can alter what you're willing to trade away again.

That's where I want to begin. Pull up a chair.

Rich Thompson

The price of one more rung

Picture the conversation at the end of a good year. Your boss thanks you for taking on a second team. The integration went well. People stayed. The board noticed. Then comes the sentence you've heard in three different offices. "Let's revisit the title after the next planning cycle."

You drive home turning the word *after* over in your head. Last year it was after the merger. Before that, after the new president settled in. You've been doing the work for eighteen months. What, exactly, is left to demonstrate?

A glass ceiling is easy to miss from below. You can see the job. You may be asked to steady the person who holds it. Yet the people who decide who advances can keep their criteria private and move the date. Bias can be part of that bargain, too. No amount of polishing your presentation will make an unfair decision fair.

There's a cost to waiting that a compensation statement can't show. Think of the ideas you've filed away because their timing was politically inconvenient. How long has it been since you had an idea and felt free to do something about it?

Take one week you've actually lived. Count the hours you spent doing work you respect. Then count the hours you spent getting permission to do it, building a second deck to defend it, and rehearsing how to tell one vice president what another had already approved.

Some of that time bought something worth having. An experienced colleague caught a mistake. A team affected by a change got a say. Circle those hours. Now look at the rest. There may be a whole afternoon in there you'd like back.

Put that afternoon to a specific use in your imagination. Perhaps you'd spend it with a young manager who has inherited a difficult team. Perhaps you'd take your dad to the hardware store and let him look at every drill. The first thing you'd reclaim tells you something about what the climb has cost.

You can decide the next rung is worth another year. Give that decision a date, and name what you expect to have learned or gained by then. You can also decide you've given the arrangement a fair hearing. Either conclusion is more respectful of your ambition than another year of "we'll see."

> *What would you do with the afternoon you'd like back?*

The meeting you didn’t schedule

Sometimes the invitation appears at 8:07. Your boss has booked fifteen minutes, and someone from HR is on the call. By lunch you know your last day. By evening you’ve told the story four times and still can’t quite take in the sound of it.

An exit you choose and an exit announced to you can lead to the same kitchen table. They feel very different when you sit down. If the decision was made for you, take the idea of a silver lining off today’s agenda. You have people to tell. You may also want an hour when nobody needs anything from you.

One small freedom is deciding how to describe what happened. Try the plainest accurate sentence you can manage. “My role was eliminated in the reorganization. I’m taking a little time to decide what kind of work I want next.” You can stop there, even if the person listening is uncomfortable with silence.

Then call someone who knew you before the title. Tell them which kind of call this is. “I could use company. Let’s save the career advice for another day.” A person who brings over dinner and talks baseball can give you something a dozen introductions can’t.

In the first few days, keep two pages. On one, write the questions that need answers soon. When does pay end? Who can explain the benefits transition? Which household commitments are coming up? Put a person and a date beside each question you can act on. A blank beside a hard question simply tells you what to ask next.

On the other page, write what you already miss. Be precise. It might be the ten-minute walk to lunch with a colleague who could tell from your face how the morning went. If you write only “my job,” the whole loss looks indivisible. If you write her name, you can call and ask her to lunch.

Leave room for what you’re relieved to put down. Maybe it’s the Friday call that routinely swallowed dinner. Missing the team and feeling relief when Friday afternoon is quiet are compatible. You earned the right to tell the whole story.

Some people will need to find another paying role quickly. A job search and a search for more satisfying work can share a calendar. Even on the busiest interview week, keep one small appointment of your own. Lunch with that colleague would count.

What followed you home

Strip the title from a résumé and something curious happens. The person who could tell a plant manager was smoothing over a problem becomes “responsible for operational excellence.” The woman who took a new supervisor aside before he lost a good crew becomes “an experienced people leader.” Perfectly competent sentences. You’d never know whom to call from reading them.

Go back to a day when someone was especially glad you showed up. What was happening ten minutes before you arrived? What did you notice? What did you do that changed the rest of the day?

Imagine a distribution director visiting a warehouse where trucks keep missing the last pickup. She watches two shifts hand off the same clipboard. Each assumes the other has called the carrier. She asks one question, waits through the silence, and lets the two supervisors work out who owns the call. The part she enjoys most comes a week later, when a supervisor tells her they solved the next snag themselves.

That last detail matters. She might look for another warehouse to run. What lit her up was teaching people how to see their own way through a problem. That ability can travel much farther than a job description.

Try this with three days from your own career. Give each memory a verb. *Untangled. Taught. Negotiated.* Put the name of the person who benefited beside the verb. Now choose the one you would gladly do again next Thursday. A task can belong on your résumé long after you've lost your appetite for it.

Purpose can be as specific as a person whose problem you care enough to stay with. Passion is often easier to spot after the fact. You kept sketching the idea after the meeting ended. You called a colleague on the drive home because you wanted to hear how it turned out.

If your page stays blank, borrow a memory. Ask a former teammate, "When things got difficult, what did you count on me to do?" Let them finish. They may name the conversation in the parking lot that you forgot and they've remembered for years.

Listen for a possibility you haven't given a fair chance. The finance executive everyone trusted to explain the numbers might love teaching first-time board chairs. Give one of those chairs a half hour. You'll learn whether it feels as good to do the work as it does to imagine it.

> *Who benefited the last time you went home pleased with your work?*

A Tuesday worth keeping

Picture a Tuesday six months after your departure. Skip the beach. It's raining, the coffee needs replacing, and somebody has to pick up the dog at four. What work would make you glad to get up that morning?

Build the day in hours. At nine you're sitting across from a business owner trying to decide whether she can afford a second location. You like making the numbers plain enough for her to think. At eleven you're on your own, writing up what she needs to check. Do you like that part, too? At two you need to find the next person who might pay for this work. How does that hour feel?

This is where the picture of independence earns its keep. Choosing your clients can be exhilarating. Asking to be paid, following up on an unanswered email, and doing your own paperwork come with the territory. You may discover that you want a smaller organization, a four-day role, or a partner who loves the parts of the work you'd happily hand over.

You get a vote in how much of your ambition goes to work and how much comes home. For someone who has spent years being reachable from every room in the house, that can feel radical.

Now invite the people who share your life into the picture. Someone may have quietly carried the afternoons you lost to travel. Someone may be counting on the predictability of your paycheck. Let them put their own Tuesday beside yours. You may learn that three dependable dinners together matter more to your family than a month off someday.

Choose one condition that makes a trial possible. Perhaps you can explore advisory work one morning a week while you pursue a salaried role. Perhaps the household needs steady pay before you can give the idea any time at all. Put that condition in ordinary words so the people affected can agree on what it means.

Then try a small piece of the Tuesday you pictured. Keep the appointment with the business owner. Leave the phone in the hall during dinner. Notice the first moment you forget to check the time, and the first moment the work follows you into a room where you'd agreed to put it down.

The best evidence may come from someone else. A child who keeps talking because you haven't reached for your phone. A spouse who pours a second cup because, for once, you can stay. Let those moments count when you decide what success pays.

Try the work before you name it

Before you spend a Saturday choosing a business name, ask one person for twenty minutes. Choose someone whose work you know well enough to ask a question worth answering. If you're still employed, pick a conversation you can have on your own time while honoring your commitments.

Imagine a former operations leader having coffee with the director of a neighborhood nonprofit. The director mentions that the repair vans lose half a morning whenever one needs service. The old reflex is to suggest fleet software. Instead, the former executive asks, "Walk me through the last time a van broke down. Who had to change their day?"

It turns out the mechanic is quick. Only one employee can approve the repair, and he's usually out on calls. While they wait, a family stays home for a visit that won't happen. Now there's a different question on the napkin. Who else could approve a routine repair when the first person is out? The director wants to bring that question to her next staff meeting.

Nobody has hired anybody. A leader has a clearer question, and a former executive has just spent twenty minutes doing the part of the job he used to wish he had more time for.

After your own conversation, answer three questions while the details are fresh. What did the other person find useful? Which part would I happily do again? What would it take for someone to pay for this kind of help? A warm thank-you answers only the first question, and sometimes you'll need to ask even that one out loud.

If there's interest in a second conversation, agree on one small piece of work, who would use it, and what each of you expects. A sketch of the repair approval process for the director's staff meeting has a clear end. "Happy to help anytime" can quietly swallow your Tuesdays all over again.

You might find you love advising. You might miss being the one who gets to implement the decision. You might discover that the best hour you've had in months was spent helping someone who could never be a client. Each answer buys you better odds of choosing a life you'll enjoy living.

Before you put this book down, pencil something into next week that would have been hard to fit into your old one. Give it the same courtesy you once gave the meeting with the vice president. Show up. See what happens when an hour of your life belongs to a purpose you chose.

One week to find out

Use a notebook or mark up this page. Choose a seven-day window you can actually protect. A single conversation is enough for the first week.

On day one, reclaim an hour.

Which hour will you set aside? What will you move to make room?

By day three, call one person.

Whose problem would you enjoy hearing about? Write the first question you want to ask.

By day six, try a piece of the work.

What small task has a clear finish? Agree on what the other person wants before you start.

On day seven, make a decision.

What gave you energy? What did it cost? What will you repeat, change, or set down?

Could this be your next conversation?

If you recognized yourself in the person asking about the repair vans, I'd like to tell you why I wrote this book. I lead ForthReady Partners, a managed fiscal growth services firm. We help leaders find room in their budgets for things they care about. Sometimes the opening is a recurring cost nobody has had time to revisit. Sometimes it's a question about how well an existing benefit serves the people it was meant for.

Through the ForthReady Alliance Advisor program, experienced leaders can bring those questions to people who already trust their judgment. An Advisor listens for a real priority, asks whether a closer look would help, and, with permission, introduces the leader to ForthReady. Our team and the relevant specialists evaluate the opportunity. The leader decides whether to proceed.

Think of a school business officer who wants to preserve a student program. She mentions that technology contracts renew in the spring. An Advisor might ask, "Would it help to look at those renewals before you make a decision about the program?" She may already have the review covered. Knowing when to leave it there is part of the work.

Our conversations can involve legacy protection, employee wellness, or fiscal growth. The common thread is the ability to hear what matters to another leader and follow through on an introduction that serves them.

Consider the people who already call you when a decision is difficult. If you enjoy those conversations, have relationships you want to handle with care, and are curious about putting that judgment to work with ForthReady, I'd welcome a conversation.

Bring one situation from your field and one condition your next chapter needs to meet. Ask me how the Advisor role works, how compensation is structured, and what happens after an introduction. Those details belong in your decision, alongside the more personal question of whether you'd enjoy the work.

To reach me, use the email link below. Tell me the kind of leaders you know best and why you're exploring a change. If we sat down over coffee, that's where I'd want to begin.

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Ask Rich about becoming an Alliance Advisor →

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