The Joy of Strategy
A Business Plan for Life

Allison Rimm
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I first met Allison Rimm when I arrived at Massachusetts General Hospital in 1997 as the new division chief of Pediatric Radiation Oncology and the founding director of the Office for Women’s Careers. For many years, she had led hospital-wide strategic planning efforts, rallying hundreds of professionals in the bargain. Allison was also in charge of the Office of the President and served on the committee that created the new department I was hired to lead with the goal of promoting the careers of female faculty at the MGH. From the start, I relied on her expert advice, steadfast advocacy, and ability to get things done in that highly complex organization.

By the time I participated in Allison’s groundbreaking course, *The Business of Life: Bringing Organization to Souls* in 2008, I was already a full professor at Harvard Medical School and the founding director of the newly created Office for Faculty Development. I had found my calling and was enjoying a hugely satisfying career treating kids with cancer, leading my division, and helping to develop the careers of the next generation of doctors and scientists.

But I was lucky. I’d never thought of being a doctor until my college friend saw something in me and encouraged me to pursue a career in medicine. It was a moment in a friendship that led me to join the long and hopeful battle to cure children with cancer.

Not everyone is so fortunate to have such an insightful—and forceful—friend. All around me, family, friends, and acquaintances, seemed to be juggling so many commitments that they were utterly
exhausted, yet many of them expressed that they didn’t feel like much of that activity really mattered much in the long run.

At work, several of my peers and much of the junior faculty were struggling with all manner of professional challenges while also trying to have a family and maintain some sense of sanity in the process. This was especially true for the women faculty who, despite the tentative progress we’d made in gender equality, were still primarily responsible for childcare and household administration in addition to their responsibilities at work. It was in my heart, and my job description, to help them reach their professional goals and find some semblance of work/life balance.

Allison’s course not only offered us all a strategic framework to approach managing our careers and our lives, it gave us the time, space, and guidance to consider what was truly important to us and the tips, tools, and techniques necessary to make progress on the most essential initiatives. But she didn’t stop there. She blended her skills as a strategist with soulful wisdom and gave us permission to think about what made us joyful at work and at home. Now, that was a first in the highly traditional world of academic medicine! But if you stop to really think about it, doctors—or anyone for that matter—who are happy at work and thriving in their careers will bring that sense of joy into the examining room when they see patients. They will bring it to their laboratories, administrative roles, and any other endeavors they pursue. And that positive attitude fuels their ability to be effective in their many roles.

But that doesn’t just happen. Finding fulfillment and satisfaction requires that we have the tools and know-how needed to set priorities, manage our time, and cope with our own habits that stand in the way of us achieving our goals and enjoying the process. Over the years, Allison has shared the tricks of the trade that helped her rise to her senior leadership position in one of the world’s most highly esteemed institutions with hundreds of faculty and staff at the MGH through her Business of Life courses. With her warm, candid, and compassionate approach to teaching solid self-management and project manage-
ment skills, Allison created an environment where the people felt safe
to express their deepest professional concerns and their career ambi-
tions. And then they helped each other address their challenges by
sharing their own stories with one another.

Perhaps the most profound shift in the classroom took place
when these faculty-turned-students gave themselves the credit they
deserved for achieving what they had accomplished already and cul-
vatived some patience with themselves as they faced their next chal-
lenge. It was wonderful to witness the optimism—and relief—they
experienced when they learned about the concrete steps they could
take to achieve the results they desired. While I wish I had thought
about some of these things earlier in my own career, I was glad to have
had the opportunity to offer this experience to our faculty and
be a
participant.

In the *The Joy of Strategy*, Allison has recreated that space where her
readers can learn her novel approach to thinking about their lives and
careers strategically. This book is readable, entertaining, and provides
practical, doable step-by-step guidance to make a business plan for
your life. These principles come alive with the stories of people who
have used these techniques to solve problems and make their dreams
come true. All the while, Allison maintains a focus on finding some
daily pleasures while working toward longer-term goals.

Anyone who cares about using their talents to do something mean-
ingful with their lives should grab a notebook, read this book, and
complete the exercises in it. Then they should create a plan and make
it happen. Reading the *The Joy of Strategy* is a great first step.

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the C.C. Wang Professor of Radiation Oncology at Harvard Medical
School. She is a longstanding advocate for faculty development initiatives
including mentoring programs for junior faculty and numerous efforts on
behalf of women and minorities.*
Step ❶

Mission: Find Your Purpose

“Hide not your talents, they for use were made: What’s a sun-dial in the shade?”¹

—Benjamin Franklin

Every great strategic plan starts with a declaration of an entity’s purpose that expresses why it exists, what its members value, and what these people intend to accomplish. Your mission is nothing short of your purpose here on earth, and you’ll start your personal plan by spelling it out. I know that sounds lofty, as though we’re trying to find the meaning of life. But the answer to the question “What am I here to do?” isn’t as remote as you might think. What do you love to do? What are you good at? You’ll find your mission right there—it’s as accessible and profound as that. I love author Matthew Kelly’s definition of what we’re after: “Mission is where our talents and passions collide with the needs of others and the world.”²

Wouldn’t it be reassuring, when you are making decisions, to have a filter that separates what is important from what is not? That’s what a good mission statement can do for you, and creating one is the first step in engaging your heart and mind in making a plan to fulfill your most deeply held desires.

As with any organization, if you don’t have clear intentions, you will have great difficulty focusing your efforts to achieve a deliberate result. Something will happen, all right, but you may not like it. Lack of clear direction is the reason so many of us careen from task to task, collapsing in an exhausted heap at the end of the day feeling like we
haven’t really accomplished anything of value. So how can you get ahead of the daily deluge of incoming demands and opportunities and focus on what’s truly important? You need to start with knowing your own purpose, what matters most to you.

Mission Critical

While you may find it tempting to dismiss talking about abstractions such as defining your purpose as, well, abstract, discussing your intentions actually leads to very practical actions. Defining your mission is critical to allocating your resources, time, and abilities wisely.

This was evident when I was assigned the task of solving a problem that had plagued Massachusetts General Hospital’s Board of Trustees for years. The trustees wanted to feel more closely connected to this esteemed institution and to make better use of their legendary expertise. The board is a treasure trove of talent that includes captains of industry, bank presidents, a National Football League team owner and a Major League Baseball team owner, leading academics, philanthropists, and community leaders. But when they came together for board meetings, the management team spent so much time presenting vast amounts of information that the trustees reported it was like trying to drink from a fire hose. Furthermore, there was little, if any, time left for discussion, so the trustees didn’t feel like they were making much of a contribution. And they had so much to offer.

It was my job to find innovative ways to make better use of that invaluable asset and the scant twenty hours of meeting time we had each year. That required educating the trustees so they could advise the hospital leadership on matters of strategy, quality of care, and financial performance. It also meant inspiring them with stories of heroic care delivery and innovation so the trustees could be passionate advocates of the hospital’s work. How did I accomplish that goal? It all started with a focus on the hospital’s mission. I optimized their precious time together by planning board meeting agendas a year at a time to make sure they addressed all four key components of the
mission: patient care, research, education, and community health improvement. We also began the tradition of holding an annual retreat for trustees so they could more thoroughly examine different aspects of the health-care system and the hospital’s mission to deepen the trustees’ understanding and commitment. And we created subcommittees that gave board members opportunities to contribute their special expertise where it could have the greatest impact.

Isn’t that what you want for yourself? To focus on what matters most and to spend your time and talent where it can make a meaningful difference? So, just like MGH and all great organizations, you need a clear statement of your purpose. If you are paralyzed by the idea of starting this process because of the enormity of this first step, take a deep breath. We will ease into it with surprisingly simple, even fun, exercises. Help is here for you at every turn.

What Is Your Personal Mission?

You may have noticed that I asked you what your mission is. It is important to start by thinking about what’s most important to you. I am asking you to listen to your own voice. Not your parents’ or your boss’s or the neighbors’, or the voice of the ever-popular “they” who always seem to have a lot to say about just about everything. Your plan will not be successful unless it reflects your most authentic passions and employs your own brand of genius.

When I first set out to write my own mission statement, I was surprised by how many voices I recalled telling me what I should do. My mother thought my talents for healing would lead me to a career in medicine. A former teacher thought my skill with puzzles and problem solving would make me a great engineer. It took a while to sort through all that input and think about what I loved doing and where I could make a unique contribution. Since physics was among my least favorite subjects in school, engineering was clearly not it. So, do take some time to consider the advice of others, and decide how well it fits. Your mission must be an authentic reflection of you or it will not serve its intended purpose.
Joy Notes

Feeling like we’ve spent our time well is essential to our happiness. We have opportunities every day to add to our reservoir of joy when we perform good acts or just connect meaningfully with others. When we are able to use our unique gifts to help someone or make something better, we feel like we’re making a meaningful contribution and our lives matter. American psychologist Abraham Maslow showed in his famous hierarchy of needs that self-actualization is the highest driver of human motivation. According to his well-regarded theory, people who fulfill their potential experience moments of profound happiness and harmony. Furthermore, people must do what they are individually suited to do in order to be at peace with themselves.3

So, what talents and passions do you have that we can set on a (very friendly) collision course with the needs of others? When we were kids, we had no trouble tooting our horns or saying what we loved. We declared with glee what we wanted to be or do when we grew up and we never questioned whether we could do whatever we wanted. Have you ever heard a toddler say, “I want to be a fireman when I grow up, but I’m afraid I won’t be good enough?” If your ability to declare your talents has been socialized out of you, you’ll need to flex that muscle. And if you can’t say off the top of your head what you love doing, you will have to work on that too. Let’s start with a warm-up exercise that’s fun and easy and can help you get back in touch with what makes your heart sing.

EXERCISE

Part One: Proud Accomplishment

Start by thinking of an accomplishment you’re proud of, something that succeeded because of the unique blend of talents you provided. This could be anything. Maybe you pulled off a marketing coup, made a stellar presentation, or defused a volatile family situation. Per-
haps you realized that some of the kids at your child’s school didn’t have coats and you organized a clothing drive. Or, it could be that you threw a killer salsa dance party that people still talk about years later.

Grab your notebook and start writing. What was it you did that makes you smile just to remember the experience? It should be comforting to know that there are no wrong answers here. One of the most valuable lessons I learned happened when I was helping our local National Public Radio affiliate with its strategic plan. At that time, John Davidow was the news director at WBUR and he said something that has stuck with me for years. He talked about how talented his reporters were and yet so different from one another. “If I gave the same story idea to five reporters, they would come back with five very different stories, all excellent. There are many good ways to tell a story.” So, just get started writing and don’t worry about getting it “right.” Just tell your story. You can always come back to this exercise and add and edit as you see fit.

Part Two: What Made You So Successful?

There, that wasn’t such heavy lifting, was it? Now that your muscles are warmed up, it’s time to complete the second part of this exercise. Jot down in your notebook what it was about you that made you so successful. What combination of skills and abilities made you uniquely suited to pull it off?

Whatever the specifics of the accomplishment you chose, you’re looking for a feeling of success and ease, the sense that you were the right person for the task because it called on your passions and talents so that you were naturally drawn to do it. These are the hallmarks of your calling.

Look a Little Deeper

Now that you’re warmed up, it’s time for some more self-reflection. Who are you? When is the last time you really looked at yourself: your
skills, passions, and desires? What drives you? If you’ve been around any teenagers lately, chances are you’ve seen them hanging around in front of a mirror, playing with their hair, making funny faces, or trying out different voices. They spend a lot of time considering who they are and how they want to present themselves to others. But at some point, that self-examination stops and we get caught up in the busyness that keeps us from looking inside ourselves with any regularity.

This process of self-reflection often makes me think of my annual hiking trips through the national parks. Most of these parks have some pretty gorgeous scenery you can see from the car as you drive through them. And it’s wonderful that so much beauty is accessible to anyone who makes the trip. It’s always striking to me, however, that there’s so much more splendor and adventure waiting for those who are willing to take the time and make the effort to explore what’s beyond the surface. Sometimes it’s scary to confront the power of nature and to find the energy for a big climb. But if you’re willing to go inside and work a little harder than the average bear, you are usually rewarded with some spectacular views and peak experiences.

And so it is with our selves. It takes some effort to look at our inner-most thoughts and desires. It can require some real courage if we’re afraid of what we might see. Honest self-examination can indeed open up some new frontiers or require us to face some facts about ourselves that we’d just as soon ignore. Yet we turn a deaf ear to our inner voice at our peril. Failing to pay attention to what our hearts are trying to tell us can mean missing out on discovering what’s really going to fulfill us.

What Is Holding You Back?

Fear is often at the root of what is holding us back from pursuing our deepest desires and getting what we really want. We’re afraid that if we try, we might fail. Even though we know, on some level, that failure is guaranteed if we don’t try, it somehow feels less risky not to put
ourselves out there. It is often quite liberating when we face our fears head on. I’ve seen coaching clients and workshop participants address fears they’d been carrying with them for years and get past them in a matter of minutes once they were able to name the problem and make a plan.

**Examine Your Self-Doubt**

When I was a hospital senior vice president, Brenda came to interview for a job opening in one of my departments. She was a program coordinator who administered the complex logistics of a training program that was integrated with Harvard Medical School. It was clear from our discussion that she was able to manage lots of details, cope with some challenging personalities, and meet countless deadlines. So I asked her why she was interested in this administrative assistant position that was clearly less involved than what she was already doing and several pay grades below her current position. She said that what she really wanted was a management career and that “sometimes you need to take a step back in order to take a step forward.” When I pointed out that this move would be a step away from reaching her goal, her face fell and her shoulders drooped. But something sparkled in Brenda and I was impressed by her talent and earnest desire to make a bigger contribution to the hospital. Something was holding her back and I wanted to help her figure out what that was and how to drive past that roadblock so she could get what she really wanted. I offered to mentor her through the steps necessary to become a manager. She gratefully accepted.

Brenda came to our first meeting eager to get on the path to becoming a manager. We started by reviewing her résumé with an eye toward identifying where she was relative to where she needed to be to land a job in management. The most glaring hole was readily apparent—she didn’t have a college education. When I asked her why she never pursued the bachelor’s degree that was essential for her to achieve her
goal of becoming a manager, she told me that she was no good at math and there was no way she could make it through college. I asked her where she got that idea. She told me about her middle school math teacher who had humiliated her in front of her class and told her publicly that she had no aptitude for math. Hello? Within minutes, we had reached the source of the dilemma that had plagued her for decades. Shame on her math teacher who, thirty years earlier, had robbed a young girl of her confidence. But now we knew what we were dealing with and what was really holding her back.

Question Your Limiting Beliefs

I pointed out to Brenda that in order to be successful in her current job, she did math every day, some of it very sophisticated. So, when she turned to making her list of strengths, she could include math among them. Suddenly, all kinds of possibilities opened up for her. You will see her story unfold as you move through the rest of the steps in this book.

The Foundation of YOUR Mission

Let’s go on with creating the building blocks for your mission statement. In this section, you will continue to look at your passions and talents. You will also look at your core values and the principles that will guide your way. Taken together, these elements will illuminate your purpose so that your mission statement can reflect who you are, what you intend to do, and why it is important. This statement should inspire you and ignite your commitment to fulfilling it.

It is now time to round out a description of your talents. If you find it hard to wax on about what you’re really good at doing, it might help to think about how others see you. Who knows you best? What would they say are your greatest strengths?
EXERCISE

Talent Inventory

Here are some more questions to ask yourself to help you get started. Then, take it as far as you can go and record your findings in your notebook.

- What are my unique skills, talents, and strengths?
- What’s my first instinct when approaching a new challenge?
- What is the first thing I do when I enter a room?
- What do I spontaneously contribute to the activity of a group?
- What do I feel compelled to do for others?
- What are others seeking when they come to me for help?

To illustrate how this all works, let’s look at Raymond, a fictional coaching client (who draws on aspects of a few real-life clients) with an innovative ear for music and a passion for blending harmonies. When he thought about his musical gifts in relation to these questions, Raymond realized that he had an unusual set of skills. He was one of those rare artists who had lots of left-brained analytic and organizational abilities to complement his considerable creative talents. He had a unique ability to interpret great works and to imagine how to blend the many orchestral instruments to create arrangements that had a visceral impact on the audience. His colleagues always looked to him to find the flourish that would add the necessary flair to elevate a piece from well executed to exceptionally moving.

Raymond’s father, an aspiring concert pianist who never fulfilled his own ambitions, saw the creative genius his son possessed and was thrilled at the notion that someone in his family could rise to the heights he’d once imagined for himself. Raymond took his father’s enthusiasm to heart and always assumed he’d become a pianist wowing crowds across the globe with his brilliant interpretations.
of classical compositions. He was excited to have so many talents on which to build an amazing musical career. He crafted a mission statement that really lit him up: “To beautify the world with musical harmonies that soothe the soul and ignite the spirit.”

Often, what you are good at is highly correlated with what you enjoy doing. One of the reasons I’m so passionate about creating a personal strategic plan is that I want to make sure my life is full of the things that I love most. To do that, you need to know what those things are. As sad as it might sound, a lot of us just haven’t given much thought to what lights us up from the inside. Here in your virtual Walden Woods, you have the perfect opportunity to pay close attention to what you enjoy most.

**EXERCISE**

**Name Your Passions**

What are you most passionate about? You can free-associate and write down anything that comes to mind. If you’re stuck, here are a few provocative questions to get you going.

- What are some peak experiences I’ve enjoyed in my life?
- What activities am I naturally drawn to?
- What is my favorite kind of vacation?
- How do I spend my spare time?
- What are my hobbies?
- What do I do when I’m procrastinating?

It’s about this time in the Business of Life workshops that a lot of light bulbs start going off. Remember Danielle, the disgruntled fashion buyer who was stuck by inertia in a job she hated? As she worked on these questions in the hushed room of the workshop she attended, she blurted out that she’d been working for more than twenty years
and hadn’t done a single thing she loved doing. At that moment, she resolved to make a major change. While inertia had her in a holding pattern with fear of letting go of the familiar, she saw that it was actually riskier to stay in a soul-sapping situation than to cut her losses and try something new. The cost of staying put and hating her life was too high. Especially now that she saw, on paper, that her love of cooking and the arts found no expression in her current life. While she couldn’t yet see how it would, she knew that it must.

Doing What Comes Natural’lly

A wonderful benefit of creating a mission built on the foundation of your talents and passions is that you’re likely to craft one that plays to your strengths and comes naturally to you. When that is the case, success comes with relative ease. Has anyone ever complimented you for doing something that comes so easily to you that you didn’t even recognize it was a special talent? Did you respond by saying, “Oh, that was nothing, anyone can do that”? Well, not everyone can compose a symphony or twirl a baton while reciting poetry. If someone has indeed complimented you on one of your particular aptitudes, what is it that you can do that you thought anyone could do? Go back and put that on your list of talents.

I asked a client I’ll call Thelma if I could interview her about how she applies what she learned in the Business of Life management course offered her by her employer a couple of years earlier. She had mentioned she used many of the tools in both her work and personal life since taking the class. I told her I was interested in her experience because she’s one of the most strategic thinkers I know and she works so well with the planning framework in the workplace. As if to make my point for me, she said she was glad I saw those traits in her because they happen so instinctively, she wasn’t even aware of them.

Have you ever seen a job description that seemed to be written for you, almost as though the person writing it knew you and wanted you
to have the job? It’s an amazing feeling to see the details of what you love listed as qualifications you miraculously possess. That is like the time a family friend won a college scholarship designated for a student of high academic achievement who played piano and excelled on the high school tennis team. Now there’s a niche not many people could fill, but it played right into his quirky mix of gifts.

Core Values

The final building block of your mission embraces your core values. These are the principles you hold most dear that will guide your path toward fulfilling your mission. My daughter calls these her “words to live by.”

What matters most to you? You need to think about that because what you value will illuminate your way, guide how you conduct yourself, and determine what you leave behind. Guiding principles serve as an excellent filter when setting priorities. For example, after all my struggles to have my second child, being fully present for my kids and showering them with love was my highest priority, along with keeping up with my many responsibilities in the executive suite at work. Achieving both objectives took laser-like focus, and using my guiding principles helped me make decisions that would keep my energies focused on what was truly most important to me.

What Are Core Values?

Core values reflect the underlying philosophy that determines how you want to conduct your business and life. Organizations frequently use their statement of core values to describe how they expect their employees to treat their colleagues and customers as they work to carry out their mission.

While I was the senior vice president for strategic planning at Massachusetts General Hospital, we updated the institution’s mission
statement to reflect the hospital’s passionate commitment to patient-centered care as well as to improving the health of people in the surrounding communities. In this example, you can see how the hospital’s dedication to excellence and quality combines with its core values of compassion, collaboration, and innovation to infuse the MGH’s purpose of providing patient care, research, and education with passion and commitment.

**MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL HOSPITAL’S REVISED MISSION STATEMENT**

Guided by the needs of our patients and their families, we aim to deliver the very best health care in a safe, compassionate environment; to advance that care through innovative research and education; and to improve the health and well-being of the diverse communities we serve.

This revision replaced a far more utilitarian version:

To provide the highest quality care to individuals and to the local and distant communities we serve, to advance care through excellence in biomedical research, and to educate future academic and practice leaders of the health-care professions.

Can you feel the difference between these two statements? The earlier version espouses some important values such as quality and excellence. The revision built on that foundation, but made explicit the desire to place patients and families at the center of the mission and to bring safety and compassion into the mix. In this way, both the people who work at the hospital and those who use its services can see how vital they are to the hospital’s purpose. We shared a draft of the revision with hundreds of employees, staff, and patients to get their responses. Hospital leadership settled on this version only after ensuring that it reflected their values and made them proud to be affiliated with this august institution.
Some Common Core Values

I have worked over the years with many organizations to articulate their core values. Here is a sample of some frequently cited guiding principles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accountability</th>
<th>Dedication</th>
<th>Honesty</th>
<th>Passion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>Quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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It’s hard to argue with any of these, but you will likely value some more than others, relatively speaking. And, of course, there are many other possibilities that may speak more directly to you. You will create your own list and it should reflect what matters most to you. It seems like mom and apple pie, but some people do lose sight of what truly matters and stray from their right path from time to time.

Live Your Values

Miranda looked for success in all the wrong places. Trying to impress others and please her parents, she set out to shatter the glass ceiling and to do whatever it took to make it to the corner office. And she did. The only problem is that she didn’t really want to be there. She got so caught up in winning the game she had been playing for so long, she’d forgotten why she’d started playing it in the first place. Driven to win the approval of others, Miranda compromised her personal values so many times to climb the corporate ladder that she lost many friends and her sense of spirit along the way.

Looking back on it all in her late fifties, she realized in a rare moment of self-reflection that she’d sacrificed her soul to acquire all the outer trappings of success. She’d become the CEO of her large corporation, served on the boards of international companies, and sported a diamond the size of a skating rink. Yet despite the rewards
and recognition, she was spiritually bankrupt. She hated just about everything to do with her job and looked at her cutthroat colleagues with suspicion and disdain. Sadly, she saw pretty much the same thing when she looked in the mirror. As Miranda imagined herself rocking on the porch swing in her twilight years, she saw herself surrounded by people whom she paid to take care of her. She saw herself feeling empty, alone, insecure, and unfulfilled. And despite her undeniable professional achievements, she still had the urgent sense that she wasn’t good enough and never would be. She had lost herself in her quest to impress others. Worse, those people she had impressed didn’t like her much and certainly wouldn’t choose to spend their free time with her.

During her coaching sessions, Miranda discovered that she had been chasing external validation of her worth and had failed to look deep inside her own self to discover what truly mattered most to her. She finally understood that she would have to take responsibility for her actions by defining her personal values and adopting principles that would guide her future choices. She realized that she wanted to help new generations of women avoid the mistakes she had made that had taken such a toll on her and everyone who had been on the receiving end of her legendary bursts of anger. Later in this book, you will read more about Miranda’s quest to put her considerable talents to use in a way that would empower young women to find career success. She learned to create meaningful, authentic relationships, both personal and professional, and experienced true joy for the first time that she could remember.

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**EXERCISE**

*Words to Live By*

What ideology guides your actions? Think about the values and underlying philosophy that determine how you intend to live your life. These are your guiding principles. Record them in your notebook.
Putting It All Together

You’ve identified where your talents make you shine, where you feel most satisfied sharing them, and the issues, causes, people, and arenas that capture your passion. You’ve also zeroed in on the guiding principles you’ll use as a compass. Hopefully, as you look at these elements together, you see your mission coming into focus and are ready to capture that clarity in a mission statement. As you prepare to write your statement, I offer some final questions to help you integrate what you’ve listed in the previous exercises into a statement of your purpose.

EXERCISE

Part One: Answer these Guiding Questions

- What would you want people to say about you at your funeral? Or maybe you’ll find it less morbid to imagine people holding a “lifetime achievement” dinner in your honor. What are they saying about you? Your accomplishments? How you lived out your purpose? What are they saying was your unique contribution to the world? What would you say if you could write your own obituary (way, way in the future, of course)?
- If you didn’t have to earn a living, how would you spend your time?
- If you had a million dollars to donate, what cause would you support?
- What would you do if you knew you couldn’t fail?

Record your answers in your notebook.

Part Two: Write Your Mission Statement

This is a declaration of your life’s purpose—why you are here. Craft your mission statement as if you couldn’t fail. Think big and be aspi-
Mission: Find Your Purpose

rational. Don’t worry that your mission seems too big or grandiose. Just write down what feels right. You are taking this one step at a time. Following this exercise are some frequently asked questions and sample mission statements for you to review now or after you take a first stab at your mission statement.

Frequently Asked Questions

At this point in the process, many people have questions about how to produce an effective mission statement. Here are some of the most common queries I’ve received.

- **What is a good mission statement and how is it written?** An effective mission statement describes your primary purpose in a way that inspires you to take values-based action to fulfill it. It serves as a filter to help you focus your actions in accordance with your intention. Use language that motivates you and is clear and memorable.

- **How long should my mission statement be?** I’m often asked about the “right” length for a mission statement. Some say it needs to pass the coffee mug test, meaning it should be short enough for you to look at as you sip your daily cup of joe. In truth, the length needs to be what’s right for you, and you are the only one who can determine that. If it motivates and inspires you, it’s right. It’s often helpful to keep it short enough so you can remember and recite it easily. A passing glance at a framed version should energize and inspire you.

- **Will you share some sample mission statements?** I used to share my own personal mission statement in my workshops as an example of what one looks like, but stopped doing that because people would sometimes make a Mad Libs version of mine and call it their own. I will share examples from previous workshop participants to show you some effective statements. You will see mine later on, but please do create yours before you read it.
Sample Mission Statements

Use the following examples as models for crafting your mission statement, but please avoid the temptation to make a few edits to someone else’s statement and call it a day.

Personal Mission Statements

With thanks to the talented managers who took my leadership development course at MGH and gave me permission to share their personal missions, here are several examples of well-crafted mission statements.

- “To achieve personal and professional success by utilizing my knowledge and skill set when and wherever possible. I will also strive to help others and give back to the community in every way that I know how.”
- “To operate from a balanced mental, physical, and spiritual center while sharing my creative talents in both my professional and personal life.”
- “Through my compassion and generosity, I will set the best practice for my philanthropic endeavors and will inspire others to do the same. I will fulfill the need for humane education: teaching others the principles of kindness, compassion, and respect for all life.”
- “My personal mission is to be a great mom, a true and faithful partner to my husband, a good citizen, a caring daughter, daughter-in-law, and family member as well as a good friend. With my husband, we will raise smart, happy, good and independent children who will grow up to be productive and successful adults. I will have fun at the same time as accomplishing these goals. I also want to be faithful to God and want to help others in their time of need by donating time, talents, and money whenever possible.”
Mission: Find Your Purpose

- “To strive to achieve consistent growth and education in my professional career, in conjunction with a harmonious family life.”
- “My personal mission is to value myself first, so that I can give more to others with a clear mind and open heart. I will rely on my humor and empathy to help others when they need it and give to those who need it most.”
- “To provide compassionate care for less fortunate and needy throughout the local community and the entire world.”
- “I am an adoring mother driven by passion for my children, husband, and family. I strive to support, motivate, and bring joy to those I encounter throughout my life. My life is enriched and rounded out with family, friends, career, volunteer service, spirituality, and my adorable dog, who always makes me smile.”

Organizational Mission Statement

Remember Peggy and Gail, the cancer survivors who wanted to start a program for kids? Here’s their organization’s mission statement.

OUR SPACE, INC. MISSION

The mission of Our Space is to embrace children and teens who have faced or are confronting cancer. Our Space will inspire peace, spirit, and healing within a supportive community, through play, learning, and creative exploration.

My Own Mission Statements

I had occasion to use my own personal mission statement to help me make an important decision very recently. While writing this book, I was confronted with a choice. My son was preparing for his bar
mitzvah, an important rite of passage for Jewish boys on their thirteenth birthday. As part of this ceremony, which marks a young man’s entry into manhood, he needed to lead a large portion of the service as well as write and deliver a commentary. This required work of epic proportions and not a small amount of his mother’s attention to teach him the skills he’d need to excel. As the date neared, it became clear to me that I could not keep up with my consulting obligations, help my son prepare fully, and devote the intense focus necessary to write my book all at the same time. Something had to give, and the book was the only thing that had any give in the short term. Facing the prospect of falling three weeks behind on my writing schedule (remember, you’re dealing with a planner here; procrastination is painful for me), I needed centering to make a clear decision and allow myself to fully commit to whatever I chose to do. So, I turned to my personal mission statement:

Devoted to delighting my family, friends, clients, colleagues, and community, I strive to laugh loudly, love deeply, and nourish all with food for thought and balm for the soul. To use my unique talents fully to inspire others to connect with their passions and fulfill their potential so together we shine our light, spread joy, and leave the world a better place for having lived here—with purpose.

In an instant, I knew that putting my book aside for those three weeks was what I needed to do. Concentrating my efforts to help my son fill his potential at this critical juncture was central to my personal mission. I picked up the phone and told my husband what I’d discovered and prepared him for the fact that I’d be “going underground” after the bar mitzvah to spend some intensive time writing to get the book back on schedule. With Plan B firmly in place, I was able to put my attention where it was needed. And when my son delivered the performance of a lifetime and basked in the pride of know-
ing he’d done his very best, there was no doubt I had made the right decision.

Following my personal mission in no way meant compromising my professional ideals, but I want to emphasize that while critically important to me, my career is only one aspect of my life’s mission. My work and business has its own mission:

To guide individuals and organizations in identifying their unique talents, passions, and purpose and to provide the tools necessary to harness this power to ensure the joyful fulfillment of their individual and collective missions and, in so doing, improve the world.

You will notice that the two statements complement one another and work in harmony. But a balanced life is about much more than work alone, so that is reflected by the fact that I have more than one statement. My associates and I are all well aware of the company’s mission statement and it guides all of our decision making relative to business matters. Likewise, many families have a family mission statement that helps members of that important operating unit get on the same page and operate in solidarity.

Take one last look at your mission statement (of course, you can go back and revise it whenever you like) and put some final flourishes on it if you are so moved. Record your mission statement, guiding principles, and the most essential insights from your self-assessment on the left side of your Custom Life Closet for easy reference. You may even wish to make an attractive printout of your mission and hang it where you can see it every day to be reminded of what matters most to you. You may also want to consider writing another mission statement for any aspect of your life that seems to call out for its own. Most essentially, use your mission statement(s) to remind yourself of what brings you joy and matters most.
Accessible to anyone at any time, focused breathing is a tool you can use to center yourself and get clarity as you contemplate your mission or at any point in the planning process. Whether you call focusing on your breath for a few moments meditation or just taking a breather, take regular moments to jump off the treadmill to reclaim your focus. Taking time to just be quiet and listen to what your inner voice has to say to you is a critical step in finding your metaphorical song so you bring your beautiful music to life.