Chapter 8 - Lie #8: Work-life balance matters most

(highlights and my notes from the book **Nine Lies About Work** by Marcus Buckingham)

The Problem

Despite the purity of their purpose, physicians seem to have it harder than the rest of us; or at least, they feel it harder. According to a recent report from the Mayo Clinic, 52 percent of physicians report being burned out, and their incidence of PTSD is 15 percent, four times the levels in the regular workforce and three percentage points higher than the levels found in veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

15 percent of all doctors have issues with substance abuse during their careers, and their rates of depression and suicide are twice the national levels.

With its stress levels and stress-related problems, the world of doctors and nurses serves as an extreme example of the rest of the working world.

Work, our experience teaches us, is **toil—a stressor, a drainer of our energy**—and if we are not careful, it can lead to physical exhaustion, emotional emptiness, depression, and burnout. It's a transaction—we sell our time and our talent so that we can earn enough money to buy the things we love, and to provide for those we love.

We lose ourselves in work, and rediscover ourselves in life. We survive work, but live life. **When work empties us out, life fills us back up**. When work depletes us, life restores us. The answer to the problem of work, the world seems to say, is to balance it with life.

Of course, we are simplifying things here. Some people succeed in finding great satisfaction in their work, while others have hugely stressful lives outside of work. Yet still, the assumption that pervades our working world is that "work is bad" and "life is good," and therefore work-life balance matters most.

You've taken on a "stretch" assignment because it might—just might!—come with a raise, or at least a bonus, and so enable you to afford a better house for your family. But because you now have more work to do, and more resting on it, you've found that you can't attend that school-board meeting, or your cousin's wedding, or that online management course, because life is about trade-offs and this one is yours.

You've found yourself spinning plates, or juggling balls, or plugging gaps—whatever the metaphor, you've known too often the feeling of too many requests from too many quarters and not enough hours in the day. You've told yourself that if you can just keep the plates spinning, the balls in the air, the gaps plugged, then perhaps you can parcel out your attention and energy so that no one, in your work or your life, will feel too neglected—so that, although you can't be all things to all people,

your unflagging efforts will at least achieve some sort of equitable distribution.

But in the real world does anyone, anywhere, man or woman, young or old, affluent or barely solvent, ever actually find balance?

If any have, we haven't met them yet. And this is why balance is more bane than benefit. In practice, striving for it feels like **triage**. Obviously, triage can be necessary in life, but it surely is not enough—it keeps things at bay, but it **takes us away from ourselves.** And in the end, balance is an unachievable goal anyway because it asks us to aim for momentary stasis in a world that is ever-changing.

The Solution

When you're healthy, when you're at your best, when you are contributing all that your talents allow you to - that should be the goal.

When you're flourishing you are acting on the world and it on you. Your world offers up to you raw material—activities, situations, outcomes—in all parts of your life, and some of this raw material invigorates you and gives you energy. You are at your healthiest when you find this particular kind of raw material, draw it in, allow it to **feed you**, and use it to **contribute something**—and when that contribution actually seems

to **leave you with more energy**, not less. This state, not balance, is what we should strive for. What should we call it?

Eudaimonia: a Greek term that means "the fullest purest expression of you in your most elevated state."

Their idea was that each of us had a spirit, or daimon, that embodied our greatest and most unique possibilities—our natural strengths or talents—and that the state we should all seek was one where, because of the happy intersection of our role, our skills, our team, and our context, we turned these possibilities into contribution, and thus liberated our good spirit.

EXAMPLE from the book:

Miles is an anesthesiologist who revels in his work. They interviewed him (and many many others in their comprehensive work on this topic - they are very famous in this world) and here is what they found.

Miles doesn't like sick people. To be more **specific**, he doesn't seem to get much of a kick out of helping sick people get better. Here's what this discovery sounded like in our interview:

Marcus and Ashley: So, Miles, is there anything about your role that brings you down, or frustrates you?

Miles: Other than the hours?

Us: Yes. Anything in the work itself?

Miles: Well, I really don't like the follow-up.

Us: Pardon?

Miles: Yeah, I really don't like meeting up with the patients after the operation, seeing how they're doing, checking up on their recovery, giving them a few things they can do at home to alleviate their symptoms, and then meeting up again after a bit to track their progress. Don't like any of that at all.

Us: [pause] But isn't that what being a doctor is?

Miles: Not for me it's not.

Us: What don't you like about that?

Miles: The pressure.

Us: Pressure?

Miles: Yes, the pressure to make them get well. I mean, what if they don't? The body is a complex and individualized organism, so many variables, and then you combine that with a patient's lifestyle, environment, psychology, luck, and who knows if they are really going to get better. It's just too much pressure for me.

Us: Oh.

Since this flew in the face of pretty much everything we'd read on physician satisfaction—namely that doctors, like people in all

professions, should “start with why” and should derive most of their joy at work from seeing their true purpose come to life—we pressed on.

Us: Then can you tell us what you do truly enjoy about what you do?

Miles: Sure. Well, first off, I love the stress.

Us: What? Didn’t you just say you didn’t like stress?

Miles: No, I said I didn’t like the pressure of making a patient get better over time. I absolutely love the stress of keeping a patient hovering between life and death. We still know so little about how anesthesia actually works. When I first started, we used mostly thiopental. Nowadays everyone goes with that new drug propofol—the one that Michael Jackson took, which is actually a far better drug. And yet no one really knows how it all works. Both drugs seem to slow down the flow of minerals through the blood system, and so put you to sleep without stopping your heart, but we still don’t know much about how either one actually does that. The whole challenge of putting someone to sleep, and keeping them hovering there, caught between life and death, for sometimes sixteen hours at a time, all the while not quite knowing how or why it’s working—man, I love that!

Us: Have you always loved that part of it?

Miles: Yep, right from the start. Some people freak out when you have to put someone under and then gradually ease them back to life, but I

always leaned into that. I'm something of an adrenaline junkie—swim with sharks, jump out of planes, that kind of thing—so this part of it really wakes me up, makes me feel alive.

Us: Anything else you love?

Miles: Well, yeah. Frankly, it's the responsibility of the role. In the UK—less in the US and Canada—but in the UK the person who is supposed to understand the entire body of each patient is the anesthetist. The surgeon can fix the heart valves. The neurologist can tease apart the brain. The general surgeon can maneuver the bowels—all critical stuff, but all very focused and specialized. The doc who needs to understand the entire body—the entire respiratory, cardiovascular system, gastrointestinal, everything—is the anesthetist. All of those systems feed into how a patient will respond to the drugs and how he or she will hover asleep. Because when you're under, you're never just under. You're always moving up or moving down, and my job is to be finely attuned to the entire person, and to understand their entire body so well I can hold them just so. Being an anesthetist is rather like flying a plane—one wrong move and you can start to spiral down, and then another slight mistake, and then the spirals speed up, and in an instant you can find your patient spiraling down, down and away from you. I love that kind of responsibility—twelve people in the OR and all of them relying on you to know the whole person, and hold the whole person.

Us: It sounds terrifying.

Miles: No, really, it's amazing. Every day. Just love it.

Watch any famous commencement address on YouTube, or take a long lunch with a mentor, and it's almost guaranteed that at some point you'll hear the advice to "Do what you love, and you'll never work a day in your life again." And when you hear that, your heart sinks.

Some might judge Miles and say, "Well, all doctors should love seeing patients get healthy. That, after all, is the purpose of being a doctor." And yet what use is that judgment? Miles is Miles. He knows not only why he became a doctor, and why he became an anesthetist, but also what specific aspects of being an anesthetist he loves most. Others can judge all they want, but we know which doctor we would want putting us under.

More than striving for balance between work and life—**love-IN-work matters most**.

Love-in-work (I would use the term Love-In-Life, but the book is focused on work which is the author's expertise) is less of a mouthful than eudaimonia, for sure, but it might also sound soft, idealistic, and far removed from the real-world pragmatism of the freethinking leader. If it does, then bear with us. Because love—specifically, the skill of **finding love in what you do**, rather than simply "doing what you love"—leads us directly to a place that is the epitome of pragmatism.

When you're in love, you're a different person. Looking at the world through the rosy lens of love, everyone seems wonderful, people are beautiful, the world is happy and kind, and spring is in the air. Love lifts you up.

It elevates you to a new plane, where you're at your most productive, creative, generous, resilient, innovative, collaborative, open, and powerful. When you're in love, you are simply magnificent. Look at those adjectives again: ***productive, creative, generous, resilient, innovative, collaborative, open, powerful.***

Your organization, if it is careless, can crush your spirit, can diminish or ignore your daimon. But **only you can animate it**. Only you can bring love into your world at work.

The Mayo Clinic actually managed to quantify the power of love-in-work. It asked physicians how much of their time at work they spent doing those activities they loved the most. Those who reported that they spent at least 20 percent of their time doing things they loved had dramatically lower risk of burnout.

The Protocol

Twice a year, spend a week in love with your work. Select a regular week at work and take a pad around with you for the entire week. Down the middle of this pad draw a vertical line to make two columns, and write "Loved It" at the top of one column and "Loathed It" at the top of

the other. During the week, any time you find yourself feeling one of the **signs of love**—before you do something, you actively look forward to it; while you're doing it, time speeds up and you find yourself in flow; after you've done it, there's part of you looking forward to when you can do it again—scribble down exactly what that something was in the "Loved It" column.

They call these signs of love your **Red Threads**.

And any time you find yourself **feeling the inverse**—before you do something, you procrastinate, perhaps handing it off to the new person because it will be "developmental"; while you do it, time drags on and ten minutes feels like a hard-fought hour; and when you're done with it, you hope you never have to do it again—scribble down exactly what that something was in the "Loathed It" column.

Obviously, there'll be plenty of activities in your week that don't make either list, but if you spend a week in love with your work, by the end of the week you will see a list of activities in your "Loved It" column that feel different to you than the rest of your work. They'll have a different emotional valence, creating in you a distinct and distinctly positive feeling, one that draws you in and lifts you up.

You have one life, one whole cloth, one fabric for you to weave your red threads into.

And what of the list of “Loathed It” things? Obviously these are your fraying, weak threads, and your aim is to **incorporate as few of them as possible** in your life’s fabric—either by stopping these activities altogether, by partnering with someone to get them done as painlessly as possible, or by seeing if, in being combined with an activity you love (by being braided with one of your red threads), they can become less draining for you.

Now pay attention to the following and see if it resonates.

They then tell the story of **Sergei Polunin** a young gymnast from Ukraine who was recognized for his skills and brought to the Royal Ballet in London - where, just like becoming a surgeon, they pounded the protocol into him and he became the youngest principle male soloist in their history. Better than Baryshnikov and Nureyev.

But no one really knew him, and no one cared to. “He was a passionate, lyrical dancer, strong but fluid, soulful but angry, his tattooed body merely the most obvious sign of his need to push the boundaries. The powers that be at the Royal Ballet Company ignored all this, and instead did what they always do with their prodigies: they made him follow the strictures of the Royal Ballet Way.”

“Eventually he fell apart and burned out as hell. Sergei flailed around for a few years, no longer at home in either London or the Ukraine, lost without his passion, and, after his parents divorced, alone and unmoored.

And then he did what you might have done if you've ever found yourself similarly untethered: he found one thing he knew he loved—one frayed strand of a **red thread**—and he followed where it led. He asked a choreographer friend of his to create one dance that he would truly love, a choreography as lyrical as it was technical, equally precise and passionate." Then he posted it on Youtube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-tW0CkvdDI

Now it is your turn. Do the exercise, hold on to your Red Threads so you can blossom and figure out ways to share what's unique about you with the rest of the world!