Curating Your Life

The End of the Work-Life Balance Struggle

Gail Golden
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About the Author
Dedication:

This book is dedicated to my thousands of clients, who taught me almost everything I know about helping; to my marvelous sons; and to Daniel Golden, the love of my life.
Chapter 1 – Don’t Balance, Curate

When I ride the train to my office in the morning, I look at the faces of the other passengers. Some sleep, most text or listen to music, and others stare dully out of the window. Almost no one looks happy, or energized, or enthusiastic.

When I walk around downtown, it’s the same picture. Most people charge along, heads down or looking careworn and weary. The panhandlers on the street corners look especially miserable. But honestly, most of us don’t look much happier than they do.

At the end of the day, we’re heading home, the lucky ones to spend time with the people we love. Do we look eager and anticipatory? No, we mostly look even more tired than we did in the morning.

This is not how I want my life to be – and not yours, either.

Every day we read more articles about work/life balance, about managing your time, about having it all. Frankly, those articles mostly make us feel worse about ourselves. It’s all so simple - just use the right app, drink the right juice, say the right mantra, and you too can have the perfect life. Well, I’ve never found life to be simple and I’m deeply suspicious of simple answers to complicated problems.

It really is frustrating. There are so many companies offering us magical answers to all our difficulties. Just take a look at your mail – email or snail mail. Mine is full of quick solutions to make me rich, youthful, and thin. Check out the ads on TV, in publications, and on the side-bars of the websites you visit. More magic! Lately, I seem to have made it onto a sucker list for companies offering to vastly increase my client list, my income, and the number of people who are going to read this book. These offers are all magic in one way – they are excellent at reducing the weight of your wallet and making someone else rich.
I especially resent deceptively simple answers to complicated life issues. One of my pet peeves is the phrase, “Just do the right thing.” You know, most of us want to do the right thing most of the time. But how do you know what the right thing is? Sometimes we differ from each other about what is right. Another pet peeve is, “Just love one another.” What does it mean to act in a loving manner? Again, we don’t always know and sometimes we disagree. A lot of terrible crimes have been committed in the name of love.

So I will never tell you that achieving a happy and productive life is simple. If it were, we’d all be doing it. But I know for a fact that achieving a happy and productive life is possible. I have spent my life and my career so far working on this problem, and in this book I will share with you what I have learned.

Early in my career, I was running my clinical psychology practice, teaching a huge lecture course at the local university, writing a weekly newspaper column, raising three little boys, trying to be a good partner to my husband, etc. I’m a high energy person, but a lot of the time I was running on fumes. It seemed to me that I was doing none of it very well. I looked at other people who appeared to have it all together. There was the prominent physician who was also writing books, raising three kids, and serving as a leader in our synagogue. There was the professor who was doing cutting-edge research, raising four kids, writing poetry, and learning to play the guitar. There was the brilliant, highly-respected therapist with the magnificent home, always impeccably dressed and beautiful. And then there was me.

How were they doing it? I used to torture myself with the image of the person I thought I should be – always calm and pleasant, on top of all my responsibilities and still having time to be loving and funny and available to others.
And then one day I had a huge revelation. I realized that other people were looking at me as one of those people doing it all. I was dumbfounded. Didn’t they know what a train wreck I was? Wasn’t it obvious?

This led me to revelation number two. Nobody is doing it all. Everyone cuts corners somewhere. Some of us are just better than others at hiding our “dirty little secrets.”

And here’s revelation number three. Most of us make the cardinal mistake of comparing our own insides to other people’s outsides. Those folks who look as if they have it all together? Inside, they’re just as freaked out, overworked, and self-critical as you are.

Some people say you just shouldn’t compare yourself to others at all. Have your own standards and don’t pay any attention to how others are doing. Frankly, I don’t buy that for one second. Human beings are social animals, and I have never met a person who doesn’t incorporate information about other people into his or her self-evaluation. I think that’s just another impossible goal for us to fail at.

Is it helpful to compare yourself to others? Does it inspire you to work harder or make you feel discouraged? How do you choose with whom you will compare yourself? Psychologists have done a lot of research on how people use social comparison. For example, one study looked at what happens if you compare yourself to others who are doing worse than you vs. others who are doing better. You might think this is simple – comparing yourself with others who are worse off will make you feel better about yourself. (I used to joke that I preferred to hang around only with people who were older, fatter, and poorer than me. That way I got to feel young, slim, and rich.) On the other hand, you might predict that if you compare yourself to people who are doing better than you, you will feel worse about yourself.
Turns out it’s not quite that simple. (As I said before, life rarely is.) How comparisons make us feel doesn’t just depend on whether we’re comparing up or down. It also depends on whether we think that we could move toward where the other person is. So if I look at someone who is more successful than me and think, “I could do that, too,” the comparison could make me feel positive and energized. But if I think, “I’m such a loser, I can never be like that,” I’m probably going to feel pretty crappy. On the other side of the coin, if I look at someone who is less successful than me and think, “Wow, I’m in a pretty good place,” I’ll feel good. But if I look at that person and think, “Yikes, my situation is pretty precarious – I could end up like that guy,” then I’m not going to feel so great.¹

The point is that almost all of us will use social comparison as one way of measuring how well we’re doing. The trick is to observe others and then think about that information in ways that propel us toward great success and satisfaction. In the coming chapters, we’ll talk a lot more about how to develop thought patterns that help you to lead a richer, more fulfilling life.

To review, let’s go back to my three revelations:

- In spite of my feelings of inadequacy, other people thought I was someone who was doing it all.
- Nobody is doing it all.
- Most of us are making the cardinal mistake of comparing our own insides to other people’s outsides. We think that because other people look all put together they must feel all put together.

All these learnings happened in the first half of my career, when I was a psychotherapist. I spent many years deeply involved in working with unhappy people to help them create better lives for themselves. My clients included people who were depressed, anxious, obsessive-
compulsive, phobic, divorcing, injured, abused, schizophrenic – the list goes on and on. The work was very hard and very satisfying and I loved it.

But after twenty-plus years, I was sitting with a new client one day as he told me about his problems and why he had come to see me. And I thought to myself, “I know you. I know what you’re going to say and I know what I’m going to say. I know how long this is going to take and I know how it’s going to turn out.” That was the day I realized it was time for me to find a new line of work. My clients deserved a therapist who was fully engaged and I deserved to have work that challenged and excited me. The truth was, I was burned out as a therapist.

So I went looking for something else psychologists could do and I got very intrigued with how I could help business executives do their jobs better. It seemed to me I could apply what I had learned about human behavior to a new set of problems and challenges. And if I could help one business leader do his or her job better, I would probably affect more people’s emotional well-being than if I spent hundreds of hours with individual therapy clients.

It turned out that research supported my view. The field of industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology is as old as clinical psychology. I/O psychologists apply the science of human behavior to organizations and individuals in their workplaces. They focus on increasing organizational success by creating environments that get the best out of everyone who works there. The American Psychological Association has published a whole handbook on how elements of the workplace affect employees’ health and well-being.²

There is a fascinating body of research on the impact of leadership styles on employees’ productivity and happiness. For example, some researchers have looked at the impact of “transformational leadership.” This leadership style is characterized by four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized
consideration. A number of studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership has very positive effects on employee well-being, including both positive emotions and general mental health.³

So there was ample evidence for my notion that by using psychology to help business executives become better leaders, I would also be positively affecting the people in their organizations. (We’ll explore more about how leaders and managers can create an environment that enhances productivity and joy in Chapter 7.)

There was just one catch to my career plan – I didn’t know beans about business. I had run my own practice, which I didn’t even think of as a business. I had worked in medical and academic settings. But what did I know of corporate leadership? I imagined myself walking into a CEO’s office and saying, “Hello, I’m Dr. Golden and I’m here to help you.” He would respond, “What do you know of my world?” And I would have no answer.

That’s why I went to business school. For two years, I ran my full-time practice and also went to school full-time. Those were the two busiest years of my life, and later on in Chapter 3 I’ll tell you some of the secrets of how I did it. I loved my MBA program. It blew my head right open with new ideas and challenged some of my deeply-held beliefs. As a result, I have become a great fan of doing something mid-career that knocks your socks off.

MBA in hand, I said good-bye to my therapy clients (which, by the way, was quite painful for me) and joined a global management psychology consulting firm. The first year in my new career was brutal. I knew I would have to climb a learning curve, but I had no idea how hard it would be. But after a while, I began to notice something very interesting.

My new clients were very different from my old ones in many ways. In general, they were wealthier, healthier, more emotionally stable, and they had much stronger support systems
around them. But I came to realize that the two client groups were also alike in many ways – overworked, overstressed, lonely, self-critical, and exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Those captains of industry? In contrast to their mighty outsides, their insides were much the same as everyone else’s.

Let me give you two examples. In 2002, one of my therapy clients was Kelly. (All client names and identifying information in this book have been disguised.) Kelly was married, ran a small business, and was raising two young children. About a year before she came to see me, Kelly started having a series of physical and cognitive symptoms. Her body felt achy and fatigued all the time. She had difficulty concentrating on her work. Even though she was tired, she had trouble sleeping. She was finding it more and more difficult to carry on with her normal schedule of responsibilities.

She went to see her primary-care doctor time and again. Her doctor ran various tests but could find no reason for Kelly’s symptoms. In those days many of my referrals came from primary-care physicians, and Kelly’s doctor sent her to see me. As we explored her life landscape, we realized Kelly had ignored her symptoms of fatigue and exhaustion for years. Her philosophy was to just keep on pushing through. And finally her body forced her to stop.

Second example: I met Sean in 2017 when he was referred to me for coaching by his CEO. Sean was a highly successful top-level executive who was in the running to become the next CEO of his company. He was highly intelligent, hard-working, ambitious, and well-liked and respected by his colleagues. He had recently been given a much larger scope of responsibility and was now managing almost half the company’s business. The CEO had given Sean challenging stretch goals for growing his part of the business. At home, Sean had two small children and a third on the way. The CEO was concerned that Sean was having difficulty
prioritizing his work. He spent too much time on details and not enough on making himself available to his team. When I spoke with Sean he was beginning to have doubts about whether he wanted to take on the CEO role.

On the surface, Kelly and Sean were very different people. But underneath – much the same. Both of them were trying to do too much. They were holding themselves to unreasonable standards. They were failing to listen to their bodies and their emotions. They were excessively worried about other people’s standards. As a result, both of these high-potential people were at risk of failing to live the full, productive lives they were capable of leading.

I left the global consulting firm in 2009 to start my own management psychology business. I’m still loving my work and learning cool new stuff every day. And I continue to find that the themes of over-obligation, unreasonable expectations, and inadequate self-care come up over and over again as I work with my clients.

Over more than 25 years of helping over-burdened people, I have learned that it’s all about managing your energy so you can lead your most joyful, productive, liberated life. Take a minute to think about energy the way an engineer does. In order to maximize your usable energy, you have to pay attention to two things. First, you have to increase your energy capacity, the amount of energy you have to work with. Second, you have to channel the outflow so you are focusing your finite amount of energy on the things that really matter and not wasting it on stupid stuff. That’s what Curating Your Life is about.

How do you increase your energy capacity? That topic has been beautifully covered in a wonderful book, The Power of Full Engagement, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz. If you want to lead a happier, more productive life, your first assignment is to read and study that book. It

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changed my life and I have recommended it to almost every one of my coaching clients. Here are some of Loehr and Schwartz’s key findings:

- You can’t manage time. You get 24 hours a day and there’s nothing you can do about it. Don’t focus on managing time, focus on managing your energy.
- Ignore the people who tell you that life is a marathon. The most productive people know that life is not a marathon, it’s a series of sprints.
- Live your life like an athlete. Sprint for a defined period of time and then take time to recover.
- Build your own personal rituals for recovery into the rhythm of your life.
- There are four kinds of energy: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. You need to assess and manage all four.

This brief summary doesn’t begin to do justice to Loehr and Schwartz’s work. Read their book.

One of the key lessons of The Power of Full Engagement is that people need to take breaks in order to manage their energy for maximum productivity. To sustain full engagement, you need to take a recovery break every 90 to 120 minutes. I don’t know how fast you read, but I’m going to suggest that you take breaks from time to time as you read this book. So how about it – want to stand up, stretch, walk around a little, have a glass of water, and then continue reading?

Maximizing your energy capacity is key to living a full and productive life. But here’s the problem – these practices take time and energy, especially at first. Rituals for recovery? Getting enough sleep? Eating healthy meals? Taking all your vacation days? Who has the time to do all that?
Even if you follow all the wise suggestions in *The Power of Full Engagement*, you will still have a finite amount of energy. That’s so important I’m going to repeat it: *No matter what you do, you will have a finite amount of energy.* And yet so many of us act as if our energy is infinite. We think we can keep adding activities and commitments to our lives and somehow we will manage to juggle it all. That’s the fallacy of work-life balance. There is a real, physical limit to what even a high-energy person can do.

Some people respond to this impossible challenge by shutting down – by leading low energy, unsatisfying lives because they feel so overwhelmed by the multiple challenges and demands that they and others place on them. (More about this is Chapter 6.) But most of the people I work with are on the other end of this spectrum – driving themselves nuts by trying to do too much.

Here’s one of my favorite images for this dilemma. You have a stovetop with four burners. How many pots can you cook at one time? This is not a trick question – the answer is four. What do you have to do if you need to cook a fifth pot? Again, not a trick question – you have to take one of the pots off the stove to make room for the new one. What happens if you try to cook seventeen pots on your stove at one time? Nothing cooks properly and you end up with a huge mess on the floor.

And yet, cooking seventeen pots on a four-burner stove is what so many of us try to do every day. We somehow believe we can stretch our energy capacity more and more to accommodate a ridiculous number of activities. And then we wonder why we become a mess on the floor!
Overworking yourself is a real, documented problem. In a review of the literature in 2009, Ronald Burke documented the disastrous consequences of working beyond your endurance:

- Psychological problems
- Physical health challenges
- Family dysfunction
- Chronic guilt
- Reduced productivity
- Sleep disorders
- Increased accidents, both on the job and driving home from work

In Japanese, there is a word, “karoshi,” which means death from overwork. Researchers have specified the number of hours of consecutive and total work time it takes to cause such a death. Contrary to the old saying, hard work has in fact killed lots of people.\(^5\)

If you don’t want to die from overwork, or for that matter experience any of the other negative consequences on this list, what can you do? How do you find the energy to do the things that matter? How do you find the energy to maximize your energy? To make it happen, you have to channel the flow of your energy by Curating Your Life.

The verb “curate” means to select and organize – a collection, an exhibit, a library, a performance, etc. Think about an art exhibition. Do you think the designer of the exhibition hung every painting the museum owns on the walls? Of course not. The designer – the curator – selected the works which were most important for the theme of the exhibit and arranged them for maximum impact for the viewer. The most important works were displayed very prominently and featured on the poster for the exhibit. Less important but still relevant paintings were
displayed in side rooms. What happened to the paintings that were not selected? They weren’t thrown out or destroyed – just stored in the back room, perhaps for exhibit at a later date.

The curator has a very difficult job, because there are always more paintings, or books, or songs than can fit into an exhibit, a library, or a concert. It’s hard because all the paintings, books, and songs are wonderful and yet you can’t include them all. The curator needs to be both thoughtful and ruthless as she decides what stays in and what is excluded.

You know what good curation looks like. You can see it when you walk into someone’s home, or read a well-designed menu or wine list, or enjoy a really well-organized conference. Take a look at Figure 1:1 – you won’t have any trouble picking out the well-curated collection.

You can use the same process to curate your life. It means selecting those activities that are most important, meaningful, and joyful for you and focusing your energy on those endeavors. It means putting some activities in the side rooms, where they are included in your life but not featured. It also means putting a whole bunch of stuff in the back room, to be reconsidered at another time.

Curating your life means sorting your activities into three categories:

- The things you are not going to do, at least not right now
- The things you will be mediocre at
- The things you will be great at

This is not simple. I want to emphasize that. As I said before, life is complicated, so beware of simple answers. Curating your life is a challenging, on-going discipline that requires a whole bunch of skills. A well-curated life doesn’t stay the same, any more than a museum always has the same exhibits on its walls.
This is not touchy-feely. Curating your life is about getting ahead, accomplishment, productivity, and having an impact. And it’s also about happiness and well-being. The two go together.

The payoff for curating your life is amazing. Living a well-curated life is *doable*. You get to feel good about yourself because you are succeeding at the things that really matter to you. You do a whole bunch of productive work and you still get to enjoy life.

I will warn you up front – curating your life can have an expected consequence. My client, Joseph, is a good example. Joseph was a young CEO who came to me for performance coaching. He was an exceptionally intelligent strategic thinker and innovator who was building a very successful marketing company. But Joseph’s life was constant chaos. He was working until late at night, handling crisis after crisis. He was emotionally reactive, often making difficult situations worse with his intense responses. He realized his leadership style was not just unsustainable, it was diminishing his performance.

Coaching Joseph was a highly-charged experience. To harness his intelligence, he had to learn to manage his energy. I trained him to recognize and control his emotions before they derailed him. Within a few months, Joseph and I found ways for him to work in a more focused, impactful manner. And then one day, Joseph presented me with a surprising new problem.

His work flow was manageable. The emotional temperature in the office was reasonably mellow. And Joseph had no idea what to do with himself.

You may be thinking, “That’s a problem? It’s a problem I’d like to have!” But many high-energy executives thrive in high-demand, tight-deadline situations. Some leaders are so dependent on that kind of adrenaline that they unconsciously create crises, much to the dismay of their teams.
Performance coaching is not just about learning to manage through hysterical times. It is also about learning to manage through tranquil times. So Joseph and I talked about how to navigate a lull. We identified three very important activities he could focus on in the calm times: strategic planning, developing talent on his team, and recharging. Joseph learned how to curate his life to maximize his performance during both the crazy times and the calm times.

Those people I mentioned earlier, the ones who seemed to be doing it all? Of course they weren’t. But they were leading curated lives, focused on the activities where they wanted to be great. No one gets this right all the time, but you can learn to do it better.

Let’s get started.

Key Take-Aways

- There’s a good chance that other people think you are doing it all.
- Nobody is doing it all.
- Don’t compare your insides to other people’s outsides. Those people who look as if they have it all together? They’re just especially good at hiding how flustered they are,
- Focus on managing your energy, not on managing time. That means increasing your energy capacity and then focusing it on the right things.
- Read *The Power of Full Engagement* by Loehr and Schwartz to learn how to increase your energy capacity.
- No matter what you do you will have a finite amount of energy. Don’t try to cook seventeen pots on a four-burner stove.
- Curate your life by sorting your activities into three categories:
  - The things you are not going to do, at least not right now
  - The things you will be mediocre at
The things you will be great at

- Curating your life is not simple.

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