

Review Extract Not for Sale

**FROM
'MAKING A LIVING'
TO
CREATING A LIFE**

*How to be happy and successful
by utterly transforming your work*

DAVID FIRTH

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david@davidfirth.com

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"I have read all of David's books. His witty thought provoking style has always been a welcome antidote to the normal intellectual drudgery in Management textbooks. His focus on the individuals role in creating the world in which they live (by what they think, say and do) has been a consistent theme in his writing - and this new book represents a compelling call to action for everyone who feels trapped, disempowered or undervalued at work. I particularly like the "nine things we could say to our children about work". I know my kids will get better advice from me as a result!"

Peter Attfield

VP - Leadership & Organisation Development, Unilever plc

"David Firth is brilliant. In his latest and greatest book *From Making a Living to Creating a Life* he unravels all rationalizations about being miserable at work. There is no denying his wit and powerful approach to transforming the relationship to work of any kind. His book surgically removes the victim mindset regarding work and replaces it with a desire to be happy and productive about all endeavors. I felt empowered, inspired and down right rejuvenated by this intelligent and heartwarming message. If you are a manager or business owner you could spend millions on systems approaches to productivity or you could buy everyone in your Company this book. I can tell you David's book offers a refreshing shift to a happy and productive workplace."

Stephen McGhee

Stephen McGhee Leadership

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Always you have been told that work is a curse and labour a misfortune.

But I say to you that when you work you fulfill a part of earth's furthest dream, assigned to you when that dream was born,

And in keeping yourself with labour you are in truth loving life,

And to love life through labour is to be intimate with life's inmost secret.

Kahil Gibran, *The Prophet*

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.

Winston Churchill

...What we call history is, I argue, the development of freedom in the world. And where there is freedom at work, THERE, hope becomes alive, and we are left to rejoice; we are left to construct something upon which to rejoice.

Rev Tom Burdett, Sermons

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to The Three Steves, one of whom, as I write this, I have not even met yet. Thank you. A Gratitude Without Limits.

"Every night, when I go to sleep, I die. Every morning, when I wake up, I am reborn."

Mohandas Gandhi

Thanks also to James and to Richard, who both warmly suggested I stop whining and get my life back.

This book is dedicated also to Ollie and Sam and Lexxi, my sons. What a future you are already creating by the way you are being.

And to Keri, my amazing wife. Not called Steve, but still a coach of sensitive and profound support and love.

And to the members of the Prosperity School, Denver 2009. Each one of you inspires me.

And finally this book is dedicated to the flight attendants on VS003, Thursday 5th November 2009¹. From the guy in Seat 16A.

¹ see Introduction, Part 1
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CONTENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION, PARTS ONE AND TWO

1. First, Start At The Source
2. Second, Start At The Source
3. Third, Start At The Source
4. Which Are The Stones In Your Pocket?
5. Work Is Not A Channel To Get What You Want, It's The Source Of What You Want
6. I Must Want To Do This Because This Is What I'm Doing
7. Four Questions To Ask About Your Willingness To Transform 'Work'
8. The Money Thing
9. God's Fault - The Genesis Story
10. Mom And Dad's Fault
11. Capital T, Capital B: The Boss 1
12. Capital T, Capital B: The Boss 2
13. Work As Misery Gives Us All Something To Be Certain Around
14. Free The Workers!
15. Hope Deferred Maketh The Something Sick
16. A Different Future
17. Do The Math (Get Good At Finances)
18. Find Out What You're Fitted For (Assessment Tools)

19. Make A Decision, Then Write Yourself A Contract For Your Decision
20. This Is What I Am Doing Now And I Can Love This Work
21. Work Life Balance? There Can Never Be A Balance When One Of The Things You Are Trying
To Balance You Neither Love Nor Respect
22. Busy Is A Story
23. 'Wanting To' Is The Death Of Distance
24. Don't Trust Anyone
25. How Do I Look? 1
26. How Do I Look? 2
27. How Do I Look? 3
28. Other People 1: We Are Disappointed In Others And Want Them To Be Different
29. Other People 2: 'Vous Autres'
30. Other People 3: Transformation In Traffic
31. Only Connect 1: Communication Problems
32. Only Connect 2: Communication Solutions
33. Only Connect 3: Asking For Help Is A Sign Of Strength
34. Work As A Conversation 1
35. Work As A Conversation 2
36. *From* The Default Conversations...
37. *...To* The Powerful Conversations
38. The Challenges Of Work As Personal Growth 1
39. The Challenges Of Work As Personal Growth 2

40. The Search For Adult-Adult Connection At Work
41. Losing Your Job, Gaining Everything
42. Are You Interested Yet?

APPENDIX:
Nine Things We Could Say To Our Children About Work

PREFACE

Hello.

Thank you for being here.

My name is David Firth. And I love my work.

It is with these exact words that I open many of the workshops I run for my business clients.

I usually do so because I run a lot of workshops for global companies, audiences made up of many for whom English is not their native language. I choose these words because I want to warn them up front that because I love my work, I might get very passionate about the workshop subject, and that might cause me to sometimes speak

VERY LOUD

and at other times

veryfastindeed

and I want to make it OK for them to stop me, if I'm going too loud and too fast, and then I can regulate my speaking so that they'll hear me more clearly.

So that's why I say that.

There's another reason I use this opening.

When you go to Consultant School, they tell you to grab the attention of your audience from the get-go. Say something unusual at the beginning, they tell us.

And so I say

'My name is David Firth. And I love my work.'

Because it's true; and it's unusual. Apparently.

This book is about what gets in the way of us all being able to say that about ourselves.²

This book shows you what needs to happen for you also to be able to say:

'I love my work'

² Not the 'David Firth' bit, obviously. Unless you really wanted to.

INTRODUCTION: PART ONE

THREE OLD CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WORK:
'the great inevitability'

CONVERSATION ONE

I'm on a plane, sitting on the tarmac at Heathrow, having just landed from New York. I'm on my way to do some workshops for clients in various parts of Europe. But, I now have two days here in London to really focus on getting some writing done on this book.

The book you are reading now I am writing now. (How cool is that?)

So, as I say, we're on the plane, waiting to get off, standing with our coats on (it's raining outside) in the aisles, holding our hand luggage and duty free, trying not to notice that peculiarly soiled feeling that international flight bestows on you, just waiting to get off. Because they can't get the walkway to attach properly to the side of the aircraft. 3471 miles and it's the last ten feet that get you.

The two individuals who have been sitting across the aisle from me, and who are both now standing in it, strike up a conversation, obviously uncomfortable at this extra time they are spending next to each other. I can't avoid hearing their discussion. She's an older lady - a lady of means, you can tell from her bags - on her way to visit friends in London. She likes doing this, does it often, doesn't mind the rain.

"After all, you don't come to England for the weather!" she says.

A number of us, the English among us, hearing this, laugh.

Then she asks him where he is traveling on to.

"To Kent" he says "I live there. But I've been in New York all week."

"Well, they've had a lot of rain there too this week!" she says. "But did you enjoy yourself anyway, in New York?"

"Well", he says, "it was work."

"Ah," she says.

"Hmm," he says.

End of conversation.

Why the end and not the start?

CONVERSATION TWO

I'm on another flight, this time coming home.

We are rising to 35,000 ft, the fields of Oxfordshire flowing away beneath us.

Gemma the flight attendant comes by to offer me a refreshing hot towel. She sees that only twenty minutes into the flight I have plugged in my laptop and begun to work (on this book; the book you are reading now I am writing now - how cool is that?).

"Awww," she says, "look at you - working already!"

"Yes," I say, "I'm writing a book and I'd really like to get it done."

"Ooo," she says, "What sort of book?"

I say: "It's a book about enjoying your work."

"Hah!" she says with what I take to be something between shock and delight, "You'll have to send me a copy of that! And, if it's out by Christmas, I'll buy a copy for my husband. He needs it too."

Later I catch Gemma pointing me out to a colleague. Mr Firth. Seat 16A. Writing a book about enjoying work. Can you imagine?

Why so hard to believe? Why so unusual an aspiration?

CONVERSATION THREE

Same flight. Five minutes later.

Gemma's supervisor comes by, offering a serve-yourself selection from the tray of inflight extras - mints, moisturizers, lip balm, a small silver pen with the name of the airline engraved on the side - and, incongruously for the times, an application form for a new credit card.

This is Emma.

Emma notices my laptop. "Oh no," she says, repeating the script from earlier, "Working already!"

"Yes," I say. And this time I look her straight in the eye, because I want her to know about me, I want her to know that I don't involve myself any more in the old story about work, the conversation where I'm now supposed to say, apologetically, something like "Yes, but needs must when the devil drives" or "Yes, but you know what the boss will say if I don't or "Yes, well must try and get it all done before I see the wife again; she won't be happy if I come home and say 'just got to finish off a bit more work, darling!'" "

All those old apologies for being trapped, being forced to, having to...

And so I smile, and from my heart I say: "But don't worry, because I love my work."

Slight pause. Emma searches back through her training for the possible options available to this statement from the inflight chat script. There are none.

"Well..." she says. And walks away.

Why nothing else to say to that?

Our relationship to work is a curious thing, yes?

INTRODUCTION: PART TWO

A NEW CONVERSATION ABOUT WORK: *at exactly the place where you say “there’s no choice” there is a choice.*

My life’s work, I’ve realised, is to help people in their work.

I help people to work more effectively: to achieve their goals and objectives and intentions and dreams. I help them to enjoy work more - hopefully a lot more. I help them to work better, harder, faster, stronger, more creatively, more passionately, more spiritually, more efficiently, more intuitively, more collaboratively – whatever it is they might be looking for - or simply to find peace amidst the chaos.

They get to have those things in their life because they make a fundamental choice about work. They step out of the old story, and into a new story, and then everything opens up.

My work, then, is work.

And I love my work, as you know.

I have been doing this now for nearly 20 years, and over that time have talked about work with thousands of people - the good and the great, the not so good nor great, the wealthy board directors, the minimum wage laborers, the leaders, the followers, the entrepreneurs, the self-employed, the contractors and the cash-in-hands, the marketing people, the supply chain people, the admin people, the finance people, the IT people, the HR people, the people without portfolio, the happy, the sad, and the disillusioned.

And I have found out some things out which I would like to share with you – insights that connect all of these people together.

And I hope that if you find something useful in these insights I’m sharing, it will help you in your own work.

Do you want to feel less stuck, less oppressed, less bored, less upset, less stressed at work?

Do you want to find a richer, more meaningful, and rewarding experience of work?

Do you want to love your work, and have that love spill out into all aspects of your life - your relationships, your health, your parenting, your community?

Are you, maybe, just beginning to make choices about your ‘career’ and wondering how to make ‘the right choice’ and ‘get a good start in life’?

If you fall into any of these categories, I believe you need to come to terms with some of the insights I'm going to share in this book.

There are not many ways in which we can think about or describe our lives without work cropping up as a large part of what we are and what we do. After we've talked about our family and friends and hobbies and our service in the community, work's going to be pretty much next on the list when it comes to accounting for our time on Earth.

The point is that work is a substantial part of being human.

Except that we don't, generally speaking, think about our work as substantial. Or at least *substantial* in the sense of considerable importance or weight.³

I've noticed - as someone who has always loved and enjoyed and been rewarded by his work - that work itself gets a bad rap in our society. We seem to accept without question that work is both an inevitability and a curse, at best a drudgery, and, at base, a punishment for not having been born rich. It seems strange to me that no matter how modern, post-modern, advanced, and clever our world becomes, we never get round to questioning this belief that we have about the suffering inherent in work. My experience has led me to believe that the default story about work is that it is the thing we'd give up tomorrow if we won the lottery.

And I think that default story causes too many people to short-change their lives.

What this leads to, I've found, is too many people blaming work, resenting work, waiting for it to stop, getting anxious about its coming, avoiding work - literally and psychologically - and trying to get through it unscathed until it ends. Life, in this way, becomes what happens when work isn't there, and that seems an awful waste of a large part of a life.⁴

It's like we graduate from our career in education and are welcomed into the world of adulthood by being given a long prison sentence. And, for many, their responses to the sentence handed down seem to shuttle along a spectrum between at one end "making the best of it"⁵, and at the other end "plotting revenge on the judge"⁶, with "resigned to its inevitability" as somewhere in the middle as the resting place.⁷

³ from the Latin *substantialis* - 'of the essence'

⁴ My first book was called *How to Make Work Fun!* which suggested that if we are being at, getting ready for, commuting to and from and recovering from work for roughly 41% of our time - and if we spend another 30% of our time on Earth asleep - then we are living a strange existence to want to get all our enjoyment and meaning out of the 29% of time that is left over for us. And that's just the math. If we are basically spending 41% of our lives in states of resentment and suffering or apathy and another 30% unconscious, then, in fact, those states are going to encroach psychologically, in a very negative way, into that remaining 29%. In other words, despite what many people hope for, we simply cannot be happy enough in the 29% alone to have that add up to a great life...

⁵ In the North of England, where I'm from originally, we have the saying 'making the most of a bad job.' Funnily enough, it's derivation being not job as work, but Job as in the one who was cursed by God...

⁶ or maybe some organizationally tolerated form of 'dirty protest'

⁷ a resting place on the side of the road for 41% of your life. Such scenery out there, such destinations of beauty, but here we are, waiting

I'm exaggerating here of course, aren't I? Surely a grown adult wouldn't tolerate such suffering.

Even those I meet who do seem to enjoy - and are well rewarded for - aspects of their work, nevertheless seem to be resigned also - resigned to the fact that some aspects of their jobs - by which they usually mean 'other people' - are a source of problems, dismay, frustration and stress.

This book is for anyone who has decided never again to live their lives - ANY aspect of their life - shuttling between suffering and resignation.

This book is for anyone who has decided they can never be paid enough, compensated enough, rewarded enough, now or in the future, for the stress and frustration which *appears to be* an inevitable accompaniment to work. That there are sadists in the world does not mean that we have to be masochists.

Whether you are just starting your career and new to the world of work - although, as we will see later, no one ever seems to be 'new' to what work stands for in our society - or whether you are mid-career and looking for a new sense of focus, purpose and energy - I've written this book for you.

Why would you spend so many of your waking hours being in a way that has you experience anything other than commitment, discovery, connection, and fun?

My conviction is that work is:

a playground or laboratory for finding out what we are capable of when we combine our talents with others

a mirror that empowers us to learn about ourselves

an ongoing journey of adventure where change is an opportunity rather than a barrier or danger

a channel for serving our families, our societies, and the world

a means of generating both material wealth and physical, psychological, and spiritual growth and well-being.

Those descriptions of what work is for me - a new definition I've created in my life - are some of the reasons that work shows up as something I can love.

And this book offers some ways that you can love your work too.

And all the ways, funnily enough, start at the beginning ...

FIRST, START AT THE SOURCE

The 'creating' conversation

Four years of studying Literature at university, six years of writing, directing, and performing theatre internationally and nearly twenty years of consulting to organizations have proved to me that human beings are creative creatures. Not me. Not some talented individuals.

All of us.

We create our lives by what we think, say and do - and by what we don't think, say and do.⁸

Good things happen to us. Bad things happen to us. There is poverty and sickness and evil and injustice and a plane falling from the sky and a young soldier blown to bits by a roadside bomb; and there is laughter and love and the sun shining and the morning dew on a blade of grass and a good book and the smile of a child. And tomorrow, we will wake up and all of those things will be true and we will create our lives again. We will lift our heads and begin again.

That *always-beginning-again* - not the *have-to-work* - is the Great Inevitability.

*Organisms do not experience their environments.
They create them.
Richard Lewontin*

The challenge is that as soon as we begin to accept the reality of how we create our lives - how we affect its past, present, and future by the choices we make in our everyday mindset and behavior - (all of this you know and have read in countless other books) - we have then to accept the inevitability that, in fact, we create every aspect of our lives. Every aspect. Not just the bits we say we like. Every bit.

Including work.

Including work, where the world tries to seduce us into the idea that we are not free and powerful. Where our freedom is constrained by *having to* work. Where our ability to act is limited by our situation in relation to our bosses or subordinates or suppliers or clients.

We are either creative beings, making our lives everywhere. Or we are not creative beings, not making our lives anywhere. That's the choice.

"I am a creative being, 100% responsible for my life. That's what they taught me at that self-development workshop. What a really cool idea! But now I have to go to work to pay the bills. Work's different, you see." Thinking such as this makes no sense.

You create your life and everything in it, including work. You create your work by what you choose to do and how you choose to apply yourself to it.

⁸ Feelings give us feedback on what we are experiencing and perhaps therefore provoke change, but only Thinking, Saying and Doing will create for us a new reality.

You create the company you work at by how you choose to act in it and what you choose to say about it.

You create your bosses by what you choose to focus on and how you choose to behave with them.

You make your day-to-day relationships with peers by how you choose to interact with them.

The holy trinity of things that we are taught to be fearful of at work - the companies, with their soullessness and greed; the bosses with their capriciousness and arrogance; our colleagues, with their 'difficult behavior' - are all, in fact, not simply within our sphere of influence to affect, but actually created, everyday, by what we think, say and do, and what we don't think, say, and do.

You do create

You have created

You can create

And you can utterly transform your life by choosing to place yourself - to accept yourself - at the creative center of your work.

No need any more for resentment, frustration, tiredness at work. No need any more to believe the best parts of yourself are kept away from your work. No need anymore for the sadness inherent in thinking that one day you will get around to living your dream. No need any more to segment your life into parcels - the work you, and the real you, the work life, and your personal life.

Just you, here now, creating...

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals...

Hamlet, William Shakespeare

SECOND, START AT THE SOURCE

The 'what really matters' conversation

*And shall I die, and this unconquered?
Tamburlaine, Christopher Marlow*

*"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley*

A few weeks before I started writing this book, my Dad died.

I helped my brother Paul and brother-in-law Phil make sense of his estate, gathering together the paperwork and the documentation, the bank accounts and shares he'd had with various companies over the years.

One of the outputs of work like that is that you end up with a number. A very precise number. No more the idea that Dad has 'a few thousand' in a savings account over there, or 'a couple of hundred' in cash in that box in his study, or 'quite a bit, I guess' in his investments. All of a sudden the number gets very exact. It fits into a cell on a spreadsheet.

This number represents what a human being's life amounts to from the material perspective.

I don't know what yours will be, or what mine will be, and when I looked at that piece of paper that had my Dad's number on it, I made a decision that I was never going to bother to worry about it again. I had never had such an immediate insight into the madness and futility of accumulating wealth as a measure of success. I was equally sure, in that moment, that such a conclusion is unaffected by how many digits there are in the number in the cell on our material accounting spreadsheet. Long or short, at the end, the number is a chillingly hollow one.

Put it this way, no one mentioned that number in the packed church at Dad's funeral.

*What will survive of us is love
An Arundal Tomb, Philip Larkin*

If we are prepared to give up on the old story of work as the toil which is forced upon us by our need to make money, if we are prepared to step out of making a living and into creating a life, then we immediately get our life back. Our life comes back to be the center of our existence, not shunted to the sides of our 'spare time.'

We find that our life itself has already started to become the legacy we leave to the world, our gift, our offering. We will inevitably accumulate stuff along the way, but that will, in the end, be hollow. The work which is living our life is creating a bunch of other stuff.

The 'what matters' stuff. The stuff they'll talk about at your funeral.

And that stuff doesn't wait for later.

*Let us reflect on what is truly of value in life, what gives meaning to our lives,
and set our priorities on the basis of that.*

The 14th Dalai Lama

So when we choose to create a life rather than make a living, then the legacy we hope to leave to the world becomes central to our daily lives in the present. The qualities we want to be remembered for become our everyday behaviors. Not trophies for the obituaries tomorrow but guidance for living and working today. And not just in our 'personal time.' With the boss. With the company. With the customers. In the busyness. Right there.

From where, then, do you wish to create? From the place of *having to* and *got to* make money?

Or from the place of choosing, of freedom and power, of what matters, of the heart and essence of what you are?

From the cell on a spreadsheet?

Or from the legacy you are right now leaving.

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Ozymandias, Percy Bysshe Shelley

Work is love made visible.

Kahlil Gibran

THIRD, START AT THE SOURCE

The 'definition of work' conversation

In the beginning was the Word...

John 1:1⁹

Words have power over us. Words create possibilities.

Yes. No. Love. Hate.

Words open up possibilities in our lives. And close them down.

The trouble is that as human beings we don't define words in dictionaries, we define them in our minds.

How the meanings of words get into our minds is from two sources. From our lived experience. And from the way the words are commonly talked about by our environment: friends, family, society, the culture.

And if we go to our minds for a definition of work, we'll keep finding the same old search results. The world has something in mind for us when it comes to work: it has a definition ready for us to internalize:

work's a curse for not having been born rich
a necessary evil
you'd prefer not to do it if you had the choice

And because we've never stopped to question that definition, we end up experiencing it like that, just as the person who defines love as 'a temporary high always undercut by icy disappointment' would tend to have a consequent level of frustrating relationships.

Our definitions of words create a field of possibility for us.

A first step to freedom would be to, for a moment, ignore the world's definition of the word; a second step would then have the willingness to question what you have in your mind.

Just because you think it, is it useful? If it isn't a useful thought, why have it?

Why would I want to define a thing I do for more than half my waking hours as 'a curse' ? Why would I have that be there if I wanted to be happy and successful?

We could get help with this process by getting out of our minds and back into the dictionary, and in particular to a dictionary of science (because after all don't the scientists tell us what's really real?). If we looked there we'd see that work is, in fact, defined, not as a curse or necessary evil, but as 'the amount of energy required to overcome resistance.'

⁹ "Let there be light" are the first words spoken by God in the Bible.

Work is the application of your effort, the way you apply your energy. That's all. And unless we make a commitment to staying in bed all day, there will always be effort. Beyond a lifetime in bed, effort is an inevitability. Can't not have it. Can't be without it¹⁰.

We throw off the covers, we emerge from our bed, we begin our day. What effort shall I apply? How shall I apply it? And to what end?

That is work: what, how, why? Substance, manner, purpose.

What are you up to?

How will you apply yourself to it?

What's your purpose with this work as your offering in the world?

From the curse definition, only being cursed is possible. From the content, manner, purpose definition, then everything is possible. A new beginning. A world waiting to be created.

In the beginning was the word...What's yours?

¹⁰ Don't say it too loud, but doesn't that mean that life itself is work? Oh no, not separate segmented things at all, but one and the same. Your *life's work*...