

ADVANCE PRAISE

“If young adults could be guided in the right direction for a life journey of meaning and purpose, we would be grooming the leaders of tomorrow for a better world. This book is the perfect guide.”

—Deepak Chopra, MD, FACP, founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing and author of *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*

“For those entering adulthood, purpose is fundamental to health, happiness, and creative work. Christine’s guidebook is the finest map of the territory today and an inspiring picture of what purposeful living can be all about—if we dare! Read this book to experience your life in a whole new way!”

—Richard Leider, international bestselling author of *The Power of Purpose, Life Reimagined*, *Work Reimagined*, and *Repacking Your Bags*.

“*The Big Picture* is a researched, accessible, and practical guide that has everything young people need to figure out what to do with their lives.”

—Pepper Schwartz, PhD, professor of sociology at the University of Washington and author of *Finding your Perfect Match*

“*The Big Picture* is very relevant and valuable for our youth—and I’m glad to see this initiative. Exercises like these can have a transformative impact on young adults. Indeed, purpose is an area in which we all would benefit from deeper reflection.”

—Hitendra Wadhwa, professor, Columbia Business School

“Whelan’s book is a must-read for those asking “what next?” in college and beyond. Building off her popular classes at the University of Wisconsin’s School of Human

Ecology, *The Big Picture* is a step-by-step guide for identifying what matters to you, and how to make your mark in the world.”

—Soyeon Shim, PhD, dean of the School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

“This book isn’t for the “I think I’ll read, scratch my beard, and think” set. It’s for doers. It’s for people who want to live fulfilled, purposeful lives. Christine Whelan gives us a book that’s grounded in both science and philosophy. It’s interactive. It’s fun. Most important, it’s wise. I loved it.”

—Victor J. Strecher, PhD, MPH, professor and director for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship, University of Michigan School of Public Health

“*The Big Picture* is the ideal small-steps guide for young adults to reimagine their lives and seek purpose from the start. As the foremost expert in effective self-improvement, Christine Whelan offers a book that spans the generations.”

—Emilio Pardo, president, Life Reimagined

“Rarely have pages in a book felt as comfortable and trustworthy as an old friend, but *The Big Picture* accomplishes that and more. Across the lifespan, understanding and implementing purpose in our lives is critical but can be daunting . . . not now! The journey to understanding your purpose now and beyond has been broken down into doable exercises and fun steps guaranteed to be a trip worth taking.”

—Janet Taylor, MD, MPH Psychiatrist

“No college grad should be without this priceless wisdom. The leading expert on self-help is your guide through interactive exercises, tested advice, and powerful tools to clarify your purpose and navigate next steps. *The Big Picture* is a research-based, fun way to get past uncertainty, doubt, or nagging from your parents so you can be your best self now.”

—Rich Feller, PhD, past president, National Career Development Association

“They say laughter is the best medicine, but I disagree. The real key to lifelong health and happiness is purpose.

“As a physician I have seen the power of purpose play out in the lives of people of all ages. As the father of five I know that helping young people understand what matters most is essential to their enjoyment of all that life has to offer. I’d happily prescribe this book to anyone interested in exploring meaning in their lives. Christine Whelan doesn’t preach —she guides. Take this workbook on your journey as you ask what matters and how to make it happen.”

—Bill Thomas, MD, founder of the Age of Disruption World Tour

“Research shows that having a purpose in life is linked to better health and better sleep—so why wait?”

—Eric Kim, PhD, Harvard School of Public Health

“Christine Whelan’s *The Big Picture* should be read and experienced by every high school and college student and recommended by every parent, teacher, and mentor. At a time when so many young people are struggling to find their life’s path and purpose, this wise, warm, and witty book will help to light their way forward.”

—John J. DiIulio Jr., Frederic Fox Leadership Professor,
University of Pennsylvania

WHAT THE READERS SAY

“*The Big Picture* offers excellent and comforting postcollege advice that helps graduates avoid feelings of tension, anxiety, uncertainty, and worry. It does something rare: it helps the reader realize what he or she really wants in his or her life, not what society or parents want. But most importantly, this book shows young adults in a calm and collected manner how to discover the many paths they can take.”

—Natalie Shribman, Bates College

“This book was a wake-up call to find my purpose in life. I thought I had it all figured out, but *The Big Picture* helped me examine my current goals and aspirations, offering a new, meaning-focused perspective.”

—Joseph Mazarella, Duquesne University

“*The Big Picture* helped me so much more than I could have ever imagined. As I began reading, I realized that even though my real adult life hadn’t started, I’d noticed that the movie of my life *had* started, and I was in it now. The camera is rolling, and I’m ready for it—wherever it takes me. This book is helping me direct it.”

—Nico Galván, The New School

“I honestly could have never gotten to where I am today without having worked through this book. It really made me think of my goals, dreams, values, and purpose. It made me think of how I want to live for the rest of my life, not only focusing on the short term but the long. Any kids who don’t know what they want to do with their lives should read this book.”

—Robert Hillard, University of Pittsburgh

“I was not expecting that *The Big Picture* would teach me anything about myself, but it actually illustrated a lot about my priorities and showed me just how much legacy matters to me. I recently changed from premed to prelaw. I was confident in my decision at the time, but still had a few doubts that prelaw was the right move. This book helped cement my feeling that I made the right move.”

—Hugh Hamilton, University of Pennsylvania

“*The Big Picture* is a relatable book that meets us where we are right now. It helped me reflect on my skills and values in a meaningful way—and then guided me toward action for a purposeful life as a college student and beyond. The exercises will help you get down to the heart of the matter and then, through personal exploration, begin to branch out to the larger purpose and goals.”

—Ally Tufenkjian, New York University

“This book has made me more motivated to do something with my life starting *right now*. I’ve considered more careers than I had originally, too, because I want to do something that makes me feel good about my impact on the world. Plus, reading this book helped me limit my stress a bit. Whew!”

—Nikki Burnett, University of Pittsburgh

The Big Picture



A GUIDE TO FINDING YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE

CHRISTINE B. WHELAN, PhD



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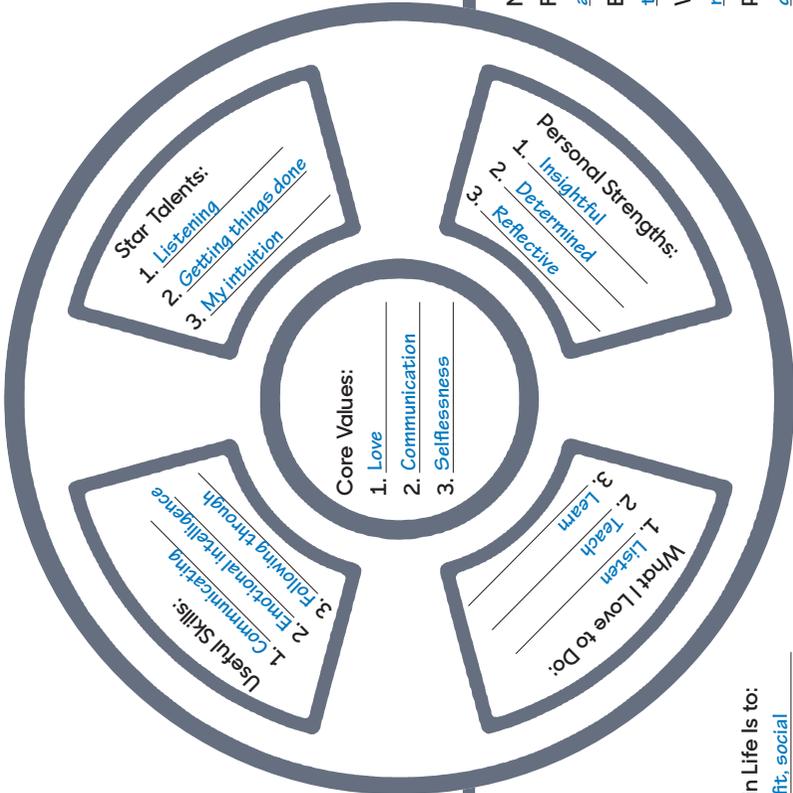
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For Daniel Whelan Moyers

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Ally's Big Picture



My Vision in Life is to:

Use nonprofit, social
justice-related theater
work to educate, reach
out to the community, and
inspire social change.

As the star and producer of the movie of his/her life,

Ally is a person who
is a loving daughter, sister, and friend who inspires
and betters the community with creative and artistic
integrity.

My Purpose in Each Role I Play:

Family: Call my family members
at least once every two weeks.

Education: Research potential
topics for my new theater piece.

Work: I will develop a more solid
monthly budget.

Physical: I will create a healthier
diet.

Financial: I will make
a monthly budget.

Spiritual: I will do a mental
check-in once a week.

Relationships: I will be less
judgmental.

Free time: I will go to more
theater.

Theme song: "Get Lucky" by Daft Punk

Tagline for the movie: "I get up every morning determined to both
 change the world and have one hell of a good time. Sometimes this
 makes planning my day difficult." — E. B. White

Preface

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT YOU, not me. But since I'm going to be your guide on a rather personal journey, I thought I should introduce myself in a preface.

Hi. I'm Dr. Christine B. Whelan. This is no ordinary self-help book, because I'm no ordinary self-help book writer. I'm an applied sociologist in the School of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the self-help industry. I've studied who buys self-help books, what advice is popular, and why. I've crafted rigorous content analyses of bestselling titles to uncover the formula of their success. I catalogued the advice of hundreds of guides to find the ones that had real research behind them (and the ones that were mostly made-up garbage). I've explored the assumptions, sociology, and psychology of personal improvement. And along the way, I've combed through the advice to find the nuggets of enduring wisdom in these popular paperbacks.

At the University of Wisconsin, I teach classes on purpose, meaning, and happiness. I cocreated a first-year introductory class called *EcoYou: Belonging, Purpose, and the Ecology of Human Happiness*, which addresses big questions like: Who am I? What is my passion and purpose? Where do I belong? How am I connected to others and to larger systems? What brings happiness and works for the greater good in human lives? I teach an upper-level class called *Consuming Happiness*, about all the ways we use the market economy—successfully and unsuccessfully—to increase our well-being.

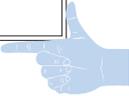
I'm also a curator at the Life Reimagined Institute, a team of thought leaders devoted to helping people navigate life's transitions with purpose. Together with the best content experts from around the world, we create online and offline

experiences to help real people turn their *coulda*, *woulda*, *shoulda* moments into *can*, *will*, and *do* successes.



Real People, Real Advice

In case you were wondering, all the stories in this book are real. The people exist. They aren't composite characters. While most folks are identified by their first name only to protect privacy, others have asked to be identified by their full, real name. The student examples quoted throughout the book are all real, too, and used with their permission.



Not only have I worked with, researched, and helped create content to help people thrive at all stages of life, I'm a big believer in practicing what I preach. I've personally completed—and benefited from—every exercise and tidbit of advice I present. The advice in this book comes from three sources: bestselling purpose-focused self-help books, academic research about purpose and meaning formation, and young-adult purpose-seekers just like you.

Indeed, that's how this book came about.

■ THIS BOOK WORKS—AND YOUR PEERS PROVED IT

In 2011 I published *Generation WTF: From What the *^%\$ to a Wise, Tenacious, and Fearless You*. It was a remix of the best of classic self-help concepts, specifically tailored to college students. I was teaching at the University of Pittsburgh at the time and had worked with hundreds of students to create and test the book. When the book was officially published, I asked a fresh batch of students to review it for me.

The first section of the book focused on the importance of getting wise—or as Aristotle would say, “knowing thyself.” I presented a brief exercise on finding your

purpose, asking those “why” questions and finding out what’s important to you. Students told me that was the most transformative exercise in the book. “Where can we get more of these kind of exercises?” they asked.

I began to look for purpose-focused guidebooks specifically geared toward young adults. With the exception of Jon Gordon’s *The Seed*; Dan Webster and Randy Gravitt’s *Finding Your Way*, excellent parable-style short stories of a college student wrestling with big questions of meaning and purpose; and a few career-guidance books that briefly mentioned the importance of finding meaningful work, I came away empty-handed.

Instead, I found dozens of purpose-focused books for people in midlife. If you were having a midlife crisis or wondering what to do with the second half of your life, you could choose from a veritable library of excellent resources. So back in the summer of 2012, I set about reading dozens of these books about purpose, written for folks in their forties, fifties, and sixties. I searched for exercises that might be right or adaptable for emerging adults, questions that would be better addressed sooner rather than later in life.

Picture me in a coffee shop pondering my strengths, values, and vision. I wrote epitaphs for my tombstone. I identified my anxieties and fears. I made commitments. I reached out to mentors. I wrote my purpose statement. I’d stare off into space as I reflected—and yes, plenty of folks gave me odd looks.

To create the first draft of this book, I pulled from several dozen of the exercises that resonated most with me. I also took a deep dive into the academic literature on purpose and meaning formation, especially during the emerging-adult years. From the groundbreaking purpose research of Stanford professor Bill Damon to the academically validated scales of Carol Ryff and Michael Steger, I immersed myself in this rich world. Finally, I did interviews with real people who were living their purposes.

After my extensive reading, research, and interviews, the real fun began. In 2013 and 2014, I tested these exercises on more than three hundred students. I first gave the book to students at the University of Pittsburgh. After revising the book based on their feedback and adapting exercises for a young-adult audience, I circulated

the text among a smaller group of testers at the New School, the University of Scranton, and the University of Pennsylvania. Then I ran it past a new group of University of Pittsburgh students, revised and edited the exercises even more, and by the autumn of 2014, students in my happiness class at the University of Wisconsin–Madison gave their feedback on the nearly final draft.

The advice in this book has been tested—and proved worthy—in a number of ways:

- ▶ It has real research to back it up.
- ▶ It's been tested by emerging adults like you.
- ▶ It's based on respected advice that's been personalized for your generation.

One of *The Big Picture* testers was Hugh, who read the book during his senior year of college. He'd started out as premed but then switched to prelaw—despite his parents' initial disapproval. “It wasn't that my parents specifically wanted to me to be premed,” Hugh said, “but that they held a markedly negative opinion of lawyers and politicians.”

Reading *The Big Picture* his senior year offered a welcome counterbalance to some of the uncertainty and financial insecurities that worried him as he prepared for graduation. “It helped me shed some of my more utilitarian ideas about a career path. For me, the difference between ‘What career path is best suited for your skills?’ and ‘What career path will help you fulfill your purpose?’ is very large. There are many potential answers to the first question, and fewer potential answers to the second. Reading *The Big Picture* was the first time I had ever really asked myself about my purpose, and it really did contribute to my sense of clarity and direction. My long-term goals and short-term goals didn't have to be identical.”

*"Today you are You, that is truer than true.
There is no one alive who is Youer than You."*

—DR. SEUSS

Thinking about the concepts raised in *The Big Picture* helped Hugh settle on his career path. He reflected, “I believe I succeeded specifically because I was confident in my own unique talents. Find your strength, develop it, and don’t be afraid to use it to your advantage.”

This book helped Hugh and many others reach their next steps after college, so with a research-based confidence that few other improvement guides can offer, I can tell you that this book works. If you complete the exercises, you’ll learn something about yourself and be better equipped to make purpose-inspired choices about your future.

I’m also confident that this book will work for *you* personally, because hundreds of your peers cowrote it. Plus, it’s focused on action. Instead of just reading ideas and theories of purpose, you’ll consider questions in a small-steps format to help you answer for yourself the question of purpose.

Because this book was written for emerging adults like you, it is not a preachy text about figuring out your one true purpose. You’re still growing, discovering, and figuring out what’s most important to you. You want to have fun, not turn everything into a future-oriented assignment. That’s why *The Big Picture* focuses on the purpose *mindset*—not some singular, pressure-filled statement of purpose.

So thank you for joining me on this journey. I hope you’ll give yourself the space to reflect on what’s great about you, explore possibilities for the future and embrace a purpose mindset that guides you into a thriving future.

Oh, and I’d love to hear from you along the way. Reach out online at TheBigPicture.Life.

Onward!

Acknowledgments

IT IS THE FINITE NATURE OF LIFE that gives every breath meaning. This book is more than four years in the making, and loved ones who were with me at the start are now only with me in spirit. My son, Daniel Whelan Moyers; my mother, Elizabeth Murphy Whelan; and my mentor and sponsor, Lorna Jorgenson Wendt, all lived lives of great purpose, but left our earth too soon.

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Hundreds of young adults tested this book in draft form at colleges and universities nationwide. In particular, I am grateful for the detailed feedback from Megan Tierney, Hugh Hamilton, Ally Tufenkjian, Joseph Mazarella, Greta Doucette, Nico Galvan, and Natalie Shribman.

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And in the tradition of saving the best for last, I thank my husband, Peter; my children Eleanor, Beatrice and John; my father, Stephen Whelan; and my parents-in-law, Katherine and John Moyers, for helping me grow into my own purpose—and share that with others.



The Big
Picture

Preproduction

THE TIME IS NOW

I always thought you just go to college and the rest figures itself out. That's what we're told. But it doesn't work like that. Going to college isn't a prescription, it's not a guide for life. No one tells you how to make it all work. Then I thought it was about setting goals, so I did that. I made one-, three-, five-, and ten-year plans. I'm a dreamer. But in one year I accomplished my two life goals—to go to Europe and graduate from college—and I had no idea what to do next. The best advice is to trust your instincts, learn about yourself, and figure out what gives you meaning and purpose. But trusting your instincts and searching for meaning is hard, especially when you feel like it's just you out there all alone. —**MARIA P.**

“WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE when you grow up?”

“Where do you want to go to college?”

“What do you want to major in?”

“Do you have a job lined up after graduation?”

You've been asked some variation of these questions hundreds of times by well-meaning (but irritating) adults. Most of the how-to-be-happy advice you've been given revolves around accumulating degrees and impressive job titles. But my guess is that you know that something is missing from this conversation—that

questions lurk behind these questions—and that a meaningful, happy life means connecting to something bigger.

For decades, the assumption was that those big questions weren't meant for young people. In the old way of doing things, you'd do what you had to do to get a job and make ends meet to support a family, and only after you achieved financial security could you ask what was important to you and how your gifts and talents could make a difference. Books on seeking purpose were mostly targeted at midlife adults who wanted to do something more meaningful with the second half of their lives than they did with the first.

Fortunately, times have changed. Research proves what you already know: You are at a pivotal juncture *right now*. Your personality is shaped more during your twenties than any other time in adulthood, and the experiences you have and the choices you make during these years will have a disproportionate influence on the life that you will lead. Indeed, according to psychologist Meg Jay's inspirational book, *The Defining Decade: Why Your Twenties Matter—And How to Make the Most of Them*, 80 percent of life's most significant events take place by the age of thirty-five, so to leave thoughtful consideration of these questions until a midlife crisis seems backward. Your late teens and twenties are the years when you are creating yourself in relationship to the world, and it is rightfully a time for asking big questions and formulating worthy dreams.

Just as kids effortlessly learn whatever language they hear before age five—but struggle to do so as they get older—your young-adult years are a window of opportunity to create the life you want by making conscious choices about what's meaningful to you . . . now.

Studies find that people who set and achieve goals in their twenties are more likely to report a sense of purpose, mastery, agency, and well-being in their thirties, but you don't have to lock yourself into one particular path or singular purpose for the rest of your life. Instead, research suggests that getting into a *purpose mindset*—identifying how your specific talents and values intersect with the needs of others—is the first step toward living a purposeful life.

This is the first guidebook to help young adults—high school and college students and recent grads—get into that purpose mindset. We ask questions such as:

- ▶ What are my talents—and how can I use those to help others and create meaning?
- ▶ How have my life experiences shaped who I am and what I can give?
- ▶ What do I value, and how can I be happy while being true to those values?

Asking and answering those questions have already transformed the lives of some of your peers: Megan read a draft of *The Big Picture* as she finished her freshman year of college and says that it gave her the perspective she needed to handle the life-changing events that unfolded next.

Megan was a serious volleyball player. In her first year of college she'd been injured twice, and as she started her sophomore year she was having differences with her coach. "After five days of tryouts," she says, "it wasn't working out—and he asked me not to come back. I was really, really upset, and I didn't know what to do with myself."

Seeking a team as well as to reclaim her identity as an athlete, Megan joined the Ultimate Frisbee club team. But during the spring semester, she collided with the biggest guy on her team and suffered a serious concussion. It wasn't her first concussion either, compounding her problems: She was unable to walk straight or sit in a room with light. She left school for several weeks as she met with neurologists to figure out what to do.

While she finished out the school year, Megan was left with permanent vertigo and severe anxiety. Contact sports were out. She started her junior year, she recalls, "without a sport and without an identity."

Looking for answers, she pulled out *The Big Picture* a second time and reread her initial responses. Megan realized that she still had much to be thankful for, and that sports weren't the only thing that gave her life purpose: "My family and friends never went away, and neither did my passion for being a teacher." The accident, and then rereading her *Big Picture* work, refocused Megan for the last two years of college.

“It was a turning point,” Megan said. “Little things just don’t get me fired up anymore. Little college dramas don’t freak me out anymore. Now that I can see my larger purpose, I can take a step back. That’s my advice to people reading this book: Look at everything that’s happening around you, all the good things that are going for you, and live with a purpose mindset. If you hit a roadblock, it isn’t going to end your dreams. It’s all about seeing the big picture.”

■ SO, WAIT. WHAT IS PURPOSE?

Megan’s advice is right on target: Live with a purpose mindset. But what exactly does that mean?

Living purposefully means having a good sense of what you are trying to accomplish in your life—and an understanding of why it’s important. Goals like getting into college or getting a job are just that: goals. While they are important, they are also shorter-term.

When you are in a purpose mindset, you are connecting to something that is bigger than you—and pursuing goals that are valuable and important toward achieving that end. The quest for beauty or justice isn’t just about your individual desires; these bigger dreams transcend our day-to-day grind and give us the perspective we need to keep going. As writer and theologian Frederick Buechner said, you find your purpose and sense of self in the world where “the heart’s deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger.”

Let’s be clear: Your *purpose* isn’t to get into college or get a certain type of job. It isn’t to marry the right kind of person or have a house in the best neighborhood. It’s also probably not

A purpose mindset will

- ▶ Be focused on meaningful action.
- ▶ Have a positive impact on others.
- ▶ Use your talents, skills, and personal qualities.
- ▶ Drive your short-term life and career goals.
- ▶ Energize you to move forward.

about selling all your worldly possessions and becoming a missionary (although for a few that might be the path), and it's certainly not about saying no to fun.

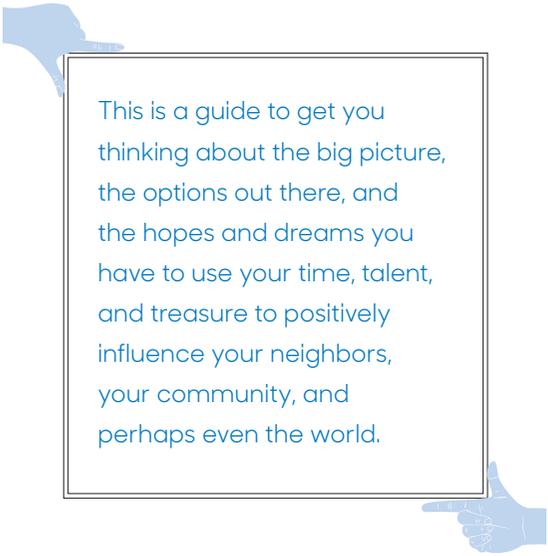
Living purposefully isn't about glamorous work or important-sounding titles. Seemingly mundane jobs can be full of meaning when approached from a purpose mindset. So can high-profile positions that earn lots of money and things you do outside of paid work.

Your purpose might be fueled by faith, or it could be a secular pursuit. And since you are starting to think about these concepts at a relatively young age, your purpose will probably change over time, too.

Purpose is a key ingredient in achieving the good life, argues bestselling purpose author Richard Leider. He defines the good life as being in the right place, with the right people, doing the right work, on purpose. "Living on purpose is a choice," writes Leider in *The Power of Purpose*. "It is a way of living in which you are aware each moment of each day that you have a choice about what to say and do and how to be. Every situation presents you with a new purpose moment—an opportunity to show up on purpose—and you are conscious of the opportunities." In other words, living on purpose means becoming aware of who you are and what you are bringing to life each day as you create your good life.

I don't have a hidden agenda to steer you into a do-goody profession. In fact, short of things that are illegal or harmful to yourself or others, I don't really care what you do—as long as you are using your unique gifts to live a life that's meaningful to you.

I do, however, believe that your purpose will be bigger than just making yourself happy. Academics call this the *prosocial* nature of purpose. Prosocial behavior is



This is a guide to get you thinking about the big picture, the options out there, and the hopes and dreams you have to use your time, talent, and treasure to positively influence your neighbors, your community, and perhaps even the world.

activity that benefits other people or society as a whole. If you are building friendships, helping family members, or doing something to benefit your community or your peers, you are engaging in prosocial behavior.

Research shows that when you think about and do things for others, you are more likely to be happy. Professors Elizabeth Dunn and Michael Norton find that asking people to spend money on others—from giving to charity to buying gifts for friends and family—reliably made them happier than spending that same money on themselves.

Aristotle wouldn't be shocked by this finding. A few thousand years ago he wrote about the difference between *hedonic* happiness—making yourself feel good by maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain at every turn—and *eudaimonic* happiness—meaningful flourishing that comes from satisfying, other-centered work and virtue-based action. Living purposefully falls into the eudaimonic happiness category. While I hope you'll have many moments of pure hedonistic enjoyment on your purpose journey, you'll also be more willing to go through some tough times and possibly sacrifice a bit for the larger meaning behind your passions.

In his book *The Purpose Economy*, Aaron Hurst argues that this search for eudaimonic, purposeful happiness is increasingly a necessity, not an option, for young adults. Purpose is a verb, not a noun, he writes. It's about what we do and how we work. "We experience purpose when we do something that's greater than ourselves. We experience purpose when we push ourselves and grow. We experience purpose as part of a community. . . . Purpose isn't a cause, revelation, or a luxury. Purpose is a choice."

When it comes to purpose, how are you feeling?

EXERCISE 1.1

Are You Living Purposefully Right Now?

Take a moment to answer these seven questions. Circle the number that best corresponds to what you honestly feel right now.

I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

My life has a clear sense of purpose.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

I understand my life's meaning.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

I enjoy making plans for the future and working to make them a reality.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

I am an active person in carrying out the plans I set for myself.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them.

1	2	3	4	5
Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Neither True or Untrue	Mostly True	Absolutely True

Now, tally up your score and write it here: _____ .

This survey is a shortened combination of Michael Steger’s meaning-of-life scale and Carol Ryff’s purpose-in-life scale, each of which has been validated to give a pretty good idea of someone’s sense of purpose. The higher your score, the more purposeful you are in how you are living your life right now. Among nearly one thousand young adults I surveyed for this research, the average score was 24 (with a possible low of 7 and a high of 35). For all the questions—and the responses—from the surveys, check out Appendix A.

Don’t like your score? Many young adults are seeking more purpose, and that’s great. You are also at the perfect juncture to ask these questions, so if you don’t feel like you’ve got it all figured out, you’re right on track: Only 6 percent of the young adults I surveyed could say the statement, “My life has a clear sense of purpose,” was absolutely true, compared to national surveys of adults showing about 21 percent who strongly agree that their life has a clear sense of purpose.

■ THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN FOR YOU

Whether you dream big or are feeling a bit overwhelmed, *The Big Picture* has exercises to help you clarify what matters most to you—and help you separate what you want from the way others tell you your life should proceed.

Whether you’re a go-getter with a single-minded purpose, or someone who has ideas but not a lot of commitment to any one thing in particular, *The Big Picture* will help you turn possibilities into reality.

William Damon, a psychology professor at Stanford, has spent more than a decade researching young adults and purpose. Rather than using scales and surveys, he conducted dozens of interviews and surveyed hundreds of teens and twenty-somethings for his book *The Path to Purpose*. Professor Damon finds that young adults are roughly split into four groups, each with varying degrees of purpose. Which one sounds the most like you?

► **Disengaged.** You feel like the future is out of your hands, so why bother even trying to make a difference? You’re busy, sure, but it often seems like life is that empty space between panic-crazed frantic action and total boredom. If you are sick of living like this, you’ve come to the right place.

▶ **Dreamer.** You have ideas about what should happen to make the world a better place, but you haven't made any practical plans for action. If this sounds like you, you can turn these dreams into life-changing realities with the purpose-based action plan you'll find on the following pages.

▶ **Dabbler.** You love to start new projects, but you lose interest too quickly to turn those early action items into a purpose-based long-term plan. If this sounds like you, read on to turn your good work so far into something even more meaningful. Being present in the moment is wonderful. Setting goals and accomplishing them over time are necessary next steps.

▶ **Purposeful.** You've found something meaningful that you want to pursue, and you know what it takes to follow through on your goals. If this is you, I'm not surprised you've picked up this book: you know how good it feels to embrace the purpose mindset. The exercises provided here will help you take the next steps on your journey.

■ THE CAMERA IS ROLLING

"When I look back on my life, I want to know that I did everything I could do to help others and that I didn't stand by and watch people in need. If I can determine I helped, I will have lived a fulfilling life," said Gabe, twenty, after working through the beta version of *The Big Picture*.

Gabe continued, "I believe that purpose is something that won't come at a specific moment for a person but will come when it is right in that person's life. My sense of purpose has come gradually throughout my years of college. While I believe my purpose drives my career decisions today, I still can't fully explain it to someone. *The Big Picture* helped me focus the lens. I'm still producing the documentary of my life."

Like Gabe, we are all works in progress. As we figure it out, the camera is rolling on the legacy we will leave at the end of our lives.

Some people write autobiographies to pass on their legacy. Others create scrapbooks of photos and boxes of memorabilia. In this book I challenge you to envision the documentary of your life.

Picture this: Fifty years from now you are sitting, popcorn in hand, ready to watch a movie of the story of your life. Maybe your kids and grandkids are sitting next to you. Maybe you've got a whole movie theater of friends and family watching. What film are they going to see?

The movie of your life is unfolding before you—right here, right now. While it could be a Hollywood blockbuster, odds are it's a series of home-movie clips—a video scrapbook of your legacy—to show how you used your talents and time here on Earth.

You are the producer and star of this movie, but the plot—the vision and purpose of your actions—is much bigger than you. The movie will be pretty dull if it's just about how great you are, or if all you're doing is sitting there waiting for something fun to happen as the camera rolls. Instead, this movie asks you to harness your talents, interests, and values to take action—to address problems, create solutions, and touch the lives of others so that you will inspire future generations to a life of outward-focused purpose, too.

Your purpose, then, is the thematic structure to the movie of your life. Purpose drives the plot and guides the choices you make as you work toward your vision for the world. One good way to think about purpose is that it's a commitment to do something that lights you up inside while setting the world on fire.

Rarely do we have wasted work, though at the time it might seem that way. We're always growing and mastering life's lessons—even hard-to-recognize ones—that move us forward on purpose.

—RICHARD LEIDER, AUTHOR

As you star in the movie of your life, you'll be asked to take on many roles—friend, student, sibling, parent, employee—and your purpose is the thread of a theme throughout all the roles you play, the things you do, and the relationships you care about most. Purpose flows from deep within you and is the center that holds, sustaining you through all the changes and phases of your life.

To live purposefully in your young-adult years doesn't mean having all the

answers—or predicting how the theme of your life movie will change over time. It just means getting in the purpose mindset by grabbing the camera and starting to roll. Indeed, it's okay to shoot more footage than you will use in the final cut. There's going to be some trial and error in your efforts to figure out your purpose and how best to pursue it, just as directors leave some scenes on the cutting-room floor. Not everything you do in life will be in direct service of your purpose, but everything you do can help you better understand what purpose is and how to bring it into reality.

Movies often include an unexpected event—something happens that seems to come from nowhere—that changes the whole plot trajectory. Our lives are like that, too. As you go through *The Big Picture* and ask those questions necessary to take the next steps in the documentary of your life, I'll also challenge you to embrace John D. Krumboltz's *happenstance learning theory*: the idea that our behavior is the product of countless numbers of learning experiences resulting from planned as well as unplanned situations. Life happens. Your job is to be able to gather the skills, interests, knowledge, beliefs, preferences, sensitivities, and emotions along the way to maximize your odds of purposeful thriving.

Action movies always have that feeling of urgency; we wonder what's going to happen next. It's the same way with your purpose. Finding your purpose will help you answer the question, "What will I be when I grow up?" But that doesn't lock you into one job for life. Your purpose can encompass many careers and interests. Odds are that your purpose is bigger than all of them. The quest for purpose isn't simply about what job you should take after graduation, and it's not about what will make you happy or rich. By living your purpose, you seek to accomplish all these things, but it's not only about those superficial goals.

Of course, nothing this valuable is easy. Producing the movie of your life with intention takes time, inner searching, and outward-focused thinking. Part 1 of this book is about character development: figuring out your star qualities and the overarching beliefs that will drive the plot forward. Part 2 challenges you to identify your vision and purpose statements—and to make commitments toward action, while part 3 helps you anticipate the plot twists along the way. From figuring out

what role you want to play to the postproduction process of pulling it all together as your theme song plays in the background, this book guides you as you do the following:

Identify your star qualities.

- ▶ Discover your talents and skills.
- ▶ Realize and build on your personal strengths.
- ▶ Highlight the core values that guide your decisions.

Choose your own adventure of purpose.

- ▶ Embrace the activities you love—and how they can improve the lives of others.
- ▶ Learn why gratitude is fuel for purpose.
- ▶ Crystallize your vision of contribution.

Commit to a life of meaning.

- ▶ Learn from those whom you admire.
- ▶ Make purpose-based commitments that offer true rewards.
- ▶ See your purpose in all areas of your life.

Overcome plot twists.

- ▶ Identify your fears and anxieties—and move past these unhelpful tricks of the mind.
- ▶ Mute the peanut gallery of pressure from friends and family to do things their way.
- ▶ Make conscious choices when values collide.
- ▶ Overcome procrastination by choosing to live a life of purpose now.



As you go through the exercises, you'll see this movie reel icon. That's a prompt to take your top answers—star talents, personal strengths, core values, vision, and purpose statement, among others—and write them in the personalized movie reel at the back of this book. I've included several copies of the reel, and

you can print out more online at TheBigPicture.Life. Once you've completed your movie reel, you'll have a one-sheet summary of the thoughtful work you've done in this book. Post it in your room, take it to your career or academic guidance counselor to guide your next meeting, and get input on it from your mentors. Share it with your close friends, too. Not only will they have insights for your next steps, they might even want to create their own Big Picture reels.

■ FOCUS YOUR LENS

You might be holding this book for any number of reasons. Maybe your school, leadership organization, or church group has asked you to read it. Maybe your parents bought it for you. Maybe you were looking for some advice geared toward your generation about the big questions of what you've been put on Earth to do. Regardless of how the book came to you, you've been presented with an opportunity to say yes and change your life.

That's a big statement, but notice how I worded it: You have been "presented with an opportunity" to change your life. Just reading this book is one thing. Working through its exercises and committing to living a life of purpose are very different. Only you can make the choice.

In his book *Your Place in the World: Creating a Life of Vision, Purpose, and Service*, inspirational author Tom Anderson writes that finding purpose is the task of a hero. "It is through our purpose that we deliver our unique gifts into the world in ways only we can. If vision lies in the ultimate realm of all possibilities, purpose begins to answer the question, 'What is mine to do?'"

You are the hero of your life's movie. It's time for action.