

The background of the book cover is a light green color with a pattern of thin, dark green lines radiating from the center towards the corners, creating a sunburst or starburst effect.

**Jeff
Haanen**

Working from the Inside Out

**A Brief Guide
to Inner Work
That Transforms
Our Outer World**



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PART 1

Disintegration

1

Fragmented Lives, Fractured Culture

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

MATTHEW 11:28-30 MSG

We sat on the sideline of a windswept soccer field. It was between games at the Wichita Fall Invitational in Kansas. Parents watched their sons eat mandarin oranges and bagels between games, surrounded by cleats, soccer socks, and cheers in the distance.

I sat next to Amy, the mother of three sons, and talked life, work, and family as the fall sun shone on our faces. She turned the conversation to her husband, Brent, and their early marriage and career. “We moved to Idaho and followed them out there,” Amy said, referring to a couple who had mentored Brent and Amy during their time as Young Life leaders after college. “In only weeks, the business—and our mentors—fell apart. We had just bought a house, and now

we were jobless. What were we supposed to do?” Pain settled in just months after the wedding day.

As Amy recounted the rocky start to Brent’s career, the conversation quickly became more honest. “Work has been such a struggle for him,” she said about her husband’s occupational odyssey. Holding various midlevel business roles, Brent now works for a wholesale alcoholic beverage distributor. “Years ago, Brent fell into a deep depression. It was pretty scary. I don’t think he likes what his work is doing to him,” she said, explaining the false persona he’s had to put on during tough business negotiations.

This weighty story about Brent caught me by surprise. Brent is vibrant, always positive, in great shape, and exudes energy.

Later that evening at our hotel, I asked Brent directly about his day job. “I help people make more money from booze,” he said with a defeated laugh. “I only send one-sentence work emails.”

I learned that Brent’s early aspirations for an up-and-to-the-right business career had been squeezed out like a tube of toothpaste, and meaning that had escaped him in his career now became transferred to hobbies, coaching, and family. Work paid the bills and happened to be close to his home. But nothing more. His wife said he usually avoided the subject of work, as he felt a tinge of shame he hadn’t been more of a “success.”

LONGING FOR MEANING

Work is where we spend most of our adult lives. The average adult will spend ninety thousand hours, or a third of their adult lives, at the job. And yet work—not just for Brent—is a shared struggle for nearly all of us.

One summer, we at Denver Institute for Faith & Work, the educational organization I founded, studied how people *felt* about their work. We did surveys and dozens of first-hand interviews. People spoke of

being proud of their work and seeing the value in what they do. But they also shared their heartaches: “I feel like no matter what I do it won’t make a difference. I wish I could make an impact.” “I feel isolated from those who share my Christian values in my workplace.” “I feel intense pressure to perform and meet demands.” “I feel like nobody cares about my values as long as I perform.” “I feel like my faith community doesn’t understand my working life.” “I feel like my boss doesn’t recognize what I contribute around here.” “I feel rushed, busied, and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of life. I can’t do one more thing.”

We sense that work must be more than a paycheck, a way to make an imprint on the world around us. Christians in particular yearn to connect heart, mind, and work to meaningful contribution to the world. And yet, doing so is often fraught with difficulty and setbacks. Even success can breed disillusionment.

Owen Hill’s early career was meteoric. He attended the Air Force Academy and then graduated with a PhD in policy analysis from the Pardee RAND Graduate School in Santa Monica, California. He was elected to the Colorado State Senate at age thirty. Having cosponsored several successful bills in Colorado, he decided to “wager it all” six years later and run for US Congress. He largely self-funded his campaign for the US House of Representatives—and lost. After losing to a long-standing incumbent, he felt growing tension around broad Republican support for personality rather than policy, so Owen decided to leave politics altogether.

Nearly penniless and jobless after a decade in politics, Owen reflected one evening over dinner about his work, “What was it really for? Did I accomplish anything that will last?” A nagging sense of emptiness hung over him like a cloud as he tried to start over in a new career, but now with four kids. At the midpoint of his life, Owen found himself reassessing his career, identity, and the overarching story of his life.

Many of us deeply enjoy our work. Yet we also feel lonely, anxious, tired, misunderstood, and undervalued at our jobs. In 2021 Gallup reported only 36 percent of US employees were engaged in their work and workplace; globally only 20 percent are engaged at work.¹ Much of the world is either going through the motions or lacking excitement for their current role.

The Covid-19 pandemic spurred millions to quit their jobs in 2021, popularly known as the Great Resignation. The mass layoffs of the 2020 pandemic lockdown, especially in restaurants and hotels, were clearly not forgotten by workers. When the economy began to recover a year later and employee power increased, millions walked out. In April 2021, four million Americans quit their jobs; in August, 65 percent of employees said they were looking for a new job.² Heather Long, a reporter at the *Washington Post*, believes the pandemic didn't just cause a labor shortage but "a great reassessment of work in America."³

As the reassessment of work becomes a stronger cultural current, we can't get away from the sense that if work is just exchanging dollars for hours, we're letting our lives slip away. Since the pandemic, a Pew Research Center study found the majority of workers who quit a job cited low pay, no opportunities for advancement, or disrespect as top reasons for leaving.⁴ As jobs were plentiful, men and women across industries hit the door. And yet, the Great Resignation was often followed by "the Great Regret" for those same employees. Their next workplaces, many found, weren't much more human than the last ones.⁵

Finding meaning in work feels like searching for Bigfoot, ever elusive and probably just a myth. Owen and Brent are asking honest questions that many of us are too afraid to ask. Am I wasting my life? Is work meaningless? As I go about my daily life, *who am I becoming?*

A SPLINTERING CULTURE

Work is not done in a vacuum. The tensions around work in our culture are growing. Here are just a few.

The opportunity gap. Working-class communities are facing growing barriers to thriving lives. Since 1970, professional wages have increased dramatically, yet the wages of high school educated men have fallen 47 percent. You're more than twice as likely to die of suicide if you have a high school degree compared to a college degree. For kids of working-class parents, the rate of single-parent homes has jumped in the last half century from 20 to 70 percent. And shockingly, high-achieving poor kids are now *less* likely (29 percent) to get a college degree than low-achieving rich kids (30 percent). "This fact is particularly hard to square," writes Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam, "with the idea at the heart of the American Dream: equality of opportunity."⁶

Crisis of work. On one side of the economic spectrum, work has become almost a religion. Derek Thompson of the *Atlantic* calls this "workism," the belief that the center of one's identity and life's purpose must always be found in work.⁷ On the other side is what researcher Nicholas Eberstadt calls America's invisible crises, the phenomenon of "men without work." As of the winter of 2020, "nearly 7 million civilian non-institutionalized men [not in prison] between the ages of 25 and 54 are neither working nor looking for work—over four times as many as are formally unemployed."⁸ Arthur Brooks, a Harvard professor and former president of the American Enterprise Institute, points out that these men are not just lagging behind economically—they're experiencing a deficit of dignity.⁹

Social isolation. A Harvard study found more than one-third of all Americans—including 61 percent of young adults—report feeling "serious loneliness," which has worsened since the pandemic.¹⁰

Despite being more “connected” than ever through social media, researchers have pointed out that loneliness is more damaging to your health than smoking or obesity. Britain even appointed a minister for loneliness. The shift to remote or hybrid work after the pandemic accelerated this trend as well.

Mental health crisis. The United States surgeon general, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, warns that young people are facing a “devastating” mental health crisis. Emergency room visits for suicide attempts rose 51 percent for adolescent girls in 2021. Yet trips to the ER related to depression, anxiety, and related issues were already up 28 percent from 2007 to 2018.¹¹ Anxiety rates are also rising for adults, especially Generation Z—individuals born from 1995 to 2010.¹²

Politicization of everything. We feel the politicization of nearly everything in our culture. From racial issues to social issues to workplace culture, much of it sits in a political container, which then turns up the heat on almost every conversation. Many churches, too, are being tugged to extremes by both pastors and congregants fearful of our cultural moment.

Decline of faith. In 1990, 87 percent of US adults identified as Christians. In 2009, that dropped to 77 percent; as of 2019, it was only 65 percent. Conversely, in 1990, 8 percent identified as “nones” or “religiously unaffiliated.” In 2019, that number tripled to 26 percent. There are thirty million more “nones” in 2020 than just ten years ago.¹³ Feeling like “the only Christian at work” is not just a feeling—it’s a reality for millions.

Partisan fury, growing class divides, deepening social isolation, economic inequality, growing mental health issues, the decline of Christian belief in the West—as culture withers, many of us feel the stress of trying to live full, healthy lives.

Imagine a wine glass sitting on a countertop. Base, stem, bowl—a perfect container for a fine cabernet. It has *integrity*, which the

dictionary defines as “the state of being whole and undivided.” Now imagine bumping that glass onto the floor, where it shatters, its pieces scattering under the fridge, near the dining table, and throughout the kitchen. In this state, it has *disintegrated*, or “[broken] up into small parts, typically as the result of impact or decay.” I’d argue that much of our contemporary culture has been disintegrating for some time.¹⁴

We rarely pause to reflect on the air we breathe, but a major reason our lives feel fragmented is that our culture is fractured. Covered by a thin veil of wealth and entertainment, we often feel stress without knowing why. As we move from the private space of home to the public space of work, we endure a thousand splinters of the day, only to go home feeling diminished, like “butter spread over too much bread,” to borrow the words of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Bilbo Baggins.

To live and work in this culture, we need a storyline that can bind together soul and system, mind and Monday, our work and our world.

WHICH STORY ABOUT WORK?

Culture tells us a story about work centered on our individual success. We will finally be happy with the title, the job, the salary. Of late, the story has shifted: we will finally be whole if we join the right cause and solve our world’s social issues, while also obtaining flexibility, work-life balance, and a fun work environment (when I want to come to an office). Though there are things to praise about this shift, it still centers on *me*, trading career climbing for personal comfort.

Christians tell a different story about work. Christians say that since God himself works, and Adam and Eve were called into the Garden of Eden “to work it and care for it,” work is intrinsically noble (Genesis 2:2, 5, 15). Many others, particularly in Reformed

communities, also believe work is a charge to build and cultivate human civilization based on God's command to "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). Work is good and a chance to impact culture.

Having shared this story probably hundreds of times, I heard honest critiques of this narrative about work as well. "Jeff, that's just high-minded idealism for people who've never had a real job in their lives." So I tell the other half of the biblical story about work: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17). Genesis clearly paints a picture of the fall and how it's impacted our work, stretching from the "thorns and thistles" of daily labor to the monuments of human pride like the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). Indeed, in the very field meant for farming, just a few verses after the fall, Cain kills his brother (Genesis 4:8), God reiterates the curse of work (Genesis 4:12), and the first technology, tools of bronze and iron, were likely forged for mining . . . and warfare (Genesis 4:22).

Work can feel creative, impactful, and important. Yet it can also feel like toil. "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me," says the author of Ecclesiastes. "All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Genesis 2:17).

The truth is the Bible tells us *both* stories of work. Work was created good, but is now fallen. It is a way to cultivate the earth, yet can also corrupt the earth. Work is new business creation, teaching children to read, and works of art; it is also conflict with coworkers, being unjustly fired, and workplace injuries—both physical and spiritual.

The challenge for us today is to look squarely and honestly at the realities of work, and ask better, more honest questions. Not only, What work am I doing? but What is work doing to me?

Professional Versus Working-Class Perspectives

Work Identity Versus Communal Identity

In professional communities, workaholicism and busyness is a sign of success. Missing a kid's football game or a family dinner is understandable, if it's for a deposition or board meeting. (Of course, far better to get to every soccer game, be fit, have a clean house, happy marriage, and have a successful, high-paying career.) For professionals, you are what you do. They derive their identity from their work.

But the working class dismiss work devotion as narcissism. One technician criticized professionals who are so "self-assured, so self-intense that they really don't care about anyone else. It's me, me, me."¹⁵ Ambition is seen as trying to get ahead, a way to leave behind the community that cared for you in pursuit of personal success.

Instead, the working class prizes traditional family values and family loyalty. If you're from a professional family, moving to Silicon Valley is a fun opportunity. But if you sell toilets, it's safer to hang out with people who won't judge you for your dirty job. "Familiar faces provide a buffer against humiliation," writes Joan C. Williams, author of *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America*.

"It's very easy for folks who have a lot of power to gravitate to Genesis 1 and 2 and the affirmation of the goodness of work," says Jim Mullins, a pastor at Redemption Tempe in Arizona. "In some ways that can become a proof text for what they already believe about work. On the same token, there are a lot of people in fields of work that are not esteemed by society that can tend to gravitate toward the Genesis 3 realities of work. They see work as toilsome, broken, and painful."¹⁶

Mullins believes "the temptation is to emphasize Genesis 1 and 2 with the powerful, and Genesis 3 with the vulnerable. But you see a deep transformation when you switch the

emphasis.” Working-class communities need to hear that work is a way to reflect God’s image and cultivate creation; professionals need to hear that work is often unjust and in need of systemic redemption. They both need to know that neither work nor family is the foundational identity for the Christian, but Christ himself.

CRACKS IN MY ARMOR

We used to live in a two-bedroom townhouse behind a shopping mall. Between my wife, three kids and myself, it was a tight fit. One baby usually slept in a Pack-N-Play in the closet. But we felt grateful, like that rust red, split-level home with tile countertops was God’s gift to us early in our married lives.

For years I worked at a Christian school during the day, but by night, I plotted out in a wire-bound notebook my own dream: an organization that helps people connect the gospel to the industries of our world. One evening in late 2012, I came home from work and my wife had rearranged a corner of our garage into an office, complete with a desk, lamp, printer, space heater, and pegboard sectioning off storage bins from the computer. “Honey, I believe you can do this,” she said to me. “I’m for you.” The tears welled up in my eyes. Her affirmation was just what I needed to hear.

And so I went for it. I spent a year recruiting a board, fundraising, building a plan, designing logos and eventually launching our first event, a gathering on faith and technology in one of America’s most secular cities, Boulder, Colorado. In the first several years, even I was surprised by our success. We got our first grant, built a donor base, launched new events, developed a leadership program, and began to hire staff. From the outside, it looked all “up and to the right.” Our budget was growing, our brand was starting to get recognition, and people I had never met somehow knew me.

But about five years in, I started to notice cracks in my armor. I would come home exhausted, with very little in the tank for my family, and often fall asleep an hour or two before my wife. When my kids needed discipline, I was sometimes very short-tempered, and then would quickly apologize, genuinely not knowing where my outburst came from. I noticed a feeling of near elation when we were “winning”—landing a large gift, hosting a successful event—and severe disappointment bordering on despair when I was rejected, slighted, or one of my plans flopped. I felt drawn to unhealthy patterns and a growing coldness within.

I noticed a growing divide between my exterior self and my interior self. My work persona (and LinkedIn profile) was all about success: growing influence, recognition, and public impact. But internally, I felt thin, lost, and concerned.

One day I pulled up to a stoplight in our family minivan. Waiting to cross the street was a thin White man, midtwenties, wearing baggy jeans, stained shoes, and a tattered tank top. He had buzzed hair, an unkempt beard, bags under his eyes, and a cigarette hanging out his mouth. I said to my wife, who was sitting next to me, “Honey, I feel like that guy looks.”

Rather than allowing faith to form my work, as my organization was built around, I felt like I had let my work *deform* me. Was this a calling from God, or had I simply baptized my own ambition? The world was cheering me on, but inside, I felt myself disengaging, disconnecting, and growing ever-wearier. I felt a growing need to shield those around me. And I had to ask myself a hard question: Was I a part of the solution for what’s gone wrong in the world, or was I a part of the problem?

I’ve come to the conclusion that “faith and work” is not first about impact, success, or even a way to advance the gospel in the world—*it’s about who we’re becoming in the process of our working lives.*

Could there be a way to neither disengage from work, nor fall prey to the illusions of success, but instead live a truly healthy, whole life? A life that integrates and heals my heart and my mind, my work and my relationships, and the world around me?

SEARCHING FOR A PATH

This book is about asking honest questions about our lives and our work. It's also about seeking a path of transformation that binds together our interior lives, our exterior lives, and our communities.

Many Christians, I believe, are living their lives like the ancient Israelites in exile. Millions of Christians are like Israel, “who dwells among the nations; she finds no resting place” (Lamentations 1:3). We are anxious, lonely, and we lack a clear sense of purpose. The stats on this are all too pervasive. And yet, Jesus seems to be offering a different kind of life. He offers real interior freedom, and genuine rest for our souls as we “learn the unforced rhythms of grace” and “learn to live freely and lightly.”

Could this kind of life be found in the actual realities of our families, communities, and even our work? Even amid the disappointments and setbacks we all experience in our families, our work, and dreams?

My conviction is that daily work is still central to both personal meaning and public contribution, and work is a way to fulfill Jesus' Great Commandment to love God and love others.

Finding a way to actually live into that conviction is a journey. It's a journey, I believe, that has the potential to transform us from the inside out.

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