

Foreword by Chip Conley

unhustle

A Rebel's Guide to Escaping the Grind and Living a Full Life

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*To Humanity,
May this book, a love letter,
help you truly thrive.*

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unhustle

definition

verb:

- 1. to make space for a full life without abandoning your ambition*
- 2. to be rather than do*
- 3. staying human in the age of machines*

noun:

- 1. the process of unhustling*
- 2. not anti-ambition, but anti-self-abandonment*

Foreword

Every week, people show up at the Modern Elder Academy (MEA) campuses with weight they can't put into words. They checked all the boxes. Career, title, money, family. The whole setup that's supposed to add up to a good life. But somewhere between what they built and how they actually feel, there's a gap. They traded their spark for the next achievement, little by little, barely noticing until it was gone.

I've watched thousands of people arrive carrying that unnamed weight. Executives, founders, CEOs, artists—people who crush it at work but feel lost in their lives. They come because they succeeded at the wrong game and are trying to figure out what the right one looks like.

Milena Miteva-Regos wrote the book that answers that question.

I met Milena on a chilly January morning in 2020, on the patio at MEA overlooking the Pacific. What struck me about her then, and what this book confirms, is that she comes to the question of “unhustling” from an unusual and specifically credible position. She didn't just fall into the hustle trap; she helped build it. As a CMO and marketing strategist, she knows exactly how the machine works, because she ran part of it.

That combination of understanding the trap from the inside while having found a genuine way to claw herself out of it is what makes this book different from others I see in this genre. Milena is not a wellness guru with clear boundaries and a perfect morning routine. She is someone who fed the system, got consumed by it, suffered the consequences of the Hustle

Hangover, as she calls the ill feelings that come with overworking, and went on a quest to find another way, not only for herself but for others. She followed what urban planners call the “Desire Path”—the trail that appears where enough people decide the official route isn't taking them where they want to go.

What she discovered is what I've seen in people who thrive at MEA: the opposite of hustle isn't giving up or checking out. It's building *real* wealth, the kind that hustle drains out of you, such as health, time, connection, experiences, and work that means something. She calls it Life Wealth. Building it is simple, and it can change your Mondays.

What I find most important about this book—beyond the research, beyond the Life Wealth framework, beyond the remarkable stories of people who found their Desire Path and walked it—is that Milena is writing for the person who is still inside the machine. Not for those who have already escaped it. She's writing for the executive reading this on a Sunday night with the familiar dread of returning to work already setting in. She's writing for the people trying to figure out what comes after the stability of the 9-to-5 job is gone, and the career ladder security doesn't exist anymore.

She's also writing for the person I used to be. My first company was called Joie de Vivre—joy of life—and by my mid-forties, I had very little of either but didn't know what to do about it. She's writing for who I still am, on the days I forget.

In every chapter she asks a question. One of them is: *Who are you without the doing?* I've had reason in recent years to sit with that question more deliberately than I might have chosen. A

Stage-3 cancer diagnosis has a clarifying effect. As a result, the answer to that question got louder, more precise, and less patient with delay.

Let me say something about why this book matters right now.

I spent more than seven years at Airbnb, watching up close as technology started to rewrite the rules of work. We were promised that tech would free us, give us our lives back. That hasn't happened. If anything, we're being pushed to do more faster and to prove ourselves even harder. The machines keep speeding up, and we're the ones burning out. Now, with AI, we're finally being forced to ask the question hustle culture has dodged for years: if machines can do the tasks better, what are we actually here for?

Milena answers that question with specificity and clarity. Humans are for making meaning. For exercising taste. For the creative connections that no algorithm could predict. For the relationships, empathy, joy, and particular quality of being human that cannot be generated with a prompt. Her argument isn't that we should work less. It's that we should stop measuring the wrong things, and that the AI era makes this more urgent, not less. When robots can execute nearly everything, your value isn't in your productivity. It's in your creativity, your judgment, your emotional depth, your presence, your capacity for meaning, your wisdom.

At MEA, we often talk about the difference between intelligence and wisdom. Intelligence accumulates knowledge and optimizes performance within existing frameworks. Wisdom questions the framework itself. It asks not *How do I win this game* but *Is this the game I want to be playing?* Most who come to us have too much of one and are hungry for the other.

You don't have to wait for a crisis to wake up. You can choose, right now, in the small moments, to start living a life that's actually yours even when everything around you is pushing the other way.

The Desire Path is already there. Milena will show you where to look.

- Chip Conley

Founder, Modern Elder Academy

Baja California Sur and Santa Fe, New Mexico

Introduction: The Rebellion

It's 5:07 a.m. on a Monday in July. The alarm hasn't gone off yet, but my brain is already sprinting. *Did I answer that email? I forgot to follow up. The presentation's due at noon.* I sigh and want to pull the covers over my head. Instead, I reach for my phone, just for a sec. Thirty-seven minutes later, my heart's pounding, and my jaw is tense, and I haven't even put my feet on the floor.

This is how millions of us wake up—already carrying a load we can't see but sure as hell can feel. The weight of keeping ahead. The weight of proving ourselves. The weight of never feeling like we've done enough. We've normalized it. We've medicated it. We call it ambition and pretend it's a badge of honor.

You've carried it so long you barely notice it. But your body does. Your nervous system does. Your spirit does. That load shows up in ways we pretend are normal: the 3 p.m. crash you blame on caffeine, the flatness in your smile, the way you snap at your partner in the evening over nothing. You can hear that weight in the words "I'm fine" when you're anything but.

I know. I carried it too. For years, I thought that was how modern life feels.

For decades, we've followed the Default Path. The one paved by our parents, our teachers, our institutions, our employers, our culture. *This way to success*, they said. *This way to security, meaning, happiness.* Most of us run it. Some of us sprint. For a few, it works. For most,

it doesn't go where it promised. Or it does, and after ten or twenty years the destination turns out to be hollow.

The Default Path is the life you never chose. It runs your calendar, your identity, your definition of success until you finally give yourself permission to change the settings.

This is not a book about opting out. It's about choosing a different path while staying ambitious.

You're not lazy. You're not broken. You're responding intelligently to a Default World that's functioning rather well, just not to your benefit.

There's another way.

#

The Napkin

October 31, 2013. Toronto.

6:13 a.m. I stared at myself in the dim mirror of a hotel room. Dark circles. Pale skin. Months of eighteen-hour days launching Madonna's health club had chewed me up. Their slogan—*Harder is Better*—had become my only religion.

I'd been a hustler since I was seven. I hustled to win ski races in Bulgaria, hustled into one of the country's most prestigious high schools, taught myself English to get into the first class of the American University in Bulgaria, hustled into the biggest ad agency in the country, then hustled my way to the United States. Harder had always worked. Harder was the only thing I knew.

The day before, standing in the brand new health club by the rows of shiny treadmills, a thought I'd been dodging for months finally broke through.

The treadmill I'm on never stops.

It didn't even have a panic button. Work nonstop. Ignore all else. Never rest. The W.I.N. cycle on autorepeat. That was the whole operating system, and I'd been running on it since childhood.

That same trip, I had lunch with a French street artist named Mr. Brainwash, who'd been hired to paint Madonna's collage on a wall inside the club. He wore a shirt splattered in yellows, oranges and blues, and looked like a man who had never once forgotten how to have fun.

Between bites of Caesar salad, he glanced up at me from under his black hat and asked:

"Who are you without the doing?"

I didn't give him an answer. At that moment, I didn't have one.

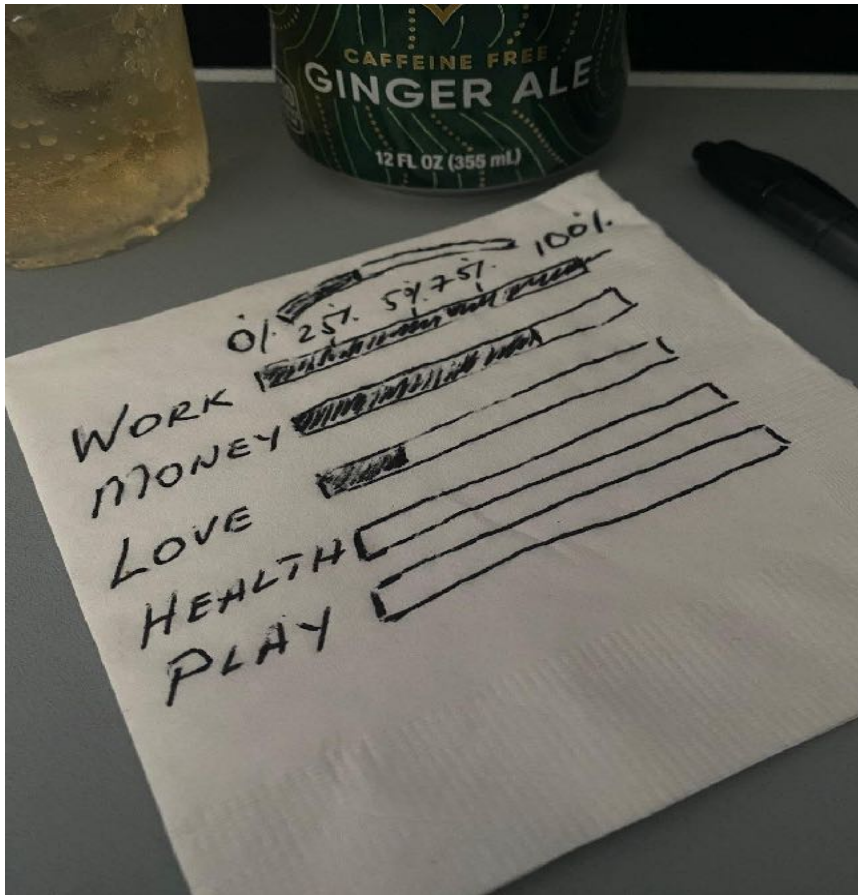
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The next day. Thirty-six thousand feet, somewhere over North America.

It was the best day of my career and the worst day of my life. The grand opening had gone smoothly, and every major news outlet reported it. My whole body was shaking. I wrapped myself in the brownish-red New Zealand merino scarf my mother-in-law, Kathy, gave me three Christmases before the last time I'd taken a vacation.

I kept shaking.

The plane lost WiFi, and I lost my excuse. I pulled a cocktail napkin from under my ginger ale and scribbled down five words. I gave each one a percentage, zero to a hundred, to see



how full each was and
how balanced my life is.

It was some exercise I
half-remembered from a
self-help book I'd read
years before.

Work: 100% Money:

75% Love: 25%

Health: 0% Play: 0%

My 1 Min Life Audit at 36000 Feet.

One minute. One napkin. My whole life on a square of crumpled paper.

The numbers said what I'd been refusing to hear. I was working nights and weekends. The only night I gave myself was Friday. Date night. Most weeks I fell asleep on the couch halfway through the movie. I wasn't getting rich, but I had a little house in Lake Tahoe and enough money to pay the bills and put food in the fridge. I chose Instagram for clients over making love. I told my friends I was too busy to see them, and after enough rain checks they stopped asking. I hadn't seen my family in years. I thought I was eating well and doing yoga, but I had days when I survived on coffee and Sauvignon. Between meetings I ran from one doctor to another for gut issues nobody could diagnose. I knew it was stress but I couldn't slow down. I was scared that if I did, I'd lose everything I'd built.

As for fun? Who has time for fun? That's not what adulting looks like. I ran as fast as I could, and I still wasn't getting there. The goal posts kept moving further away. Something was chewing at my soul like a wild dog, teeth out, ready to bite. That night, back in the hotel, I wrote in my journal:

I want to feel whole. Instead, I'm riddled with holes. There's the external pressure to always be on, and the internal hustle in my head—the constant nagging voice to do more, keep going, sleep when I'm dead. I started my business to be free. Instead I've become a cog in my own machine, my own worst boss, a slave to a

job I created. The only speed I know is fast. I wonder what would happen if I slowed down. Just a little.

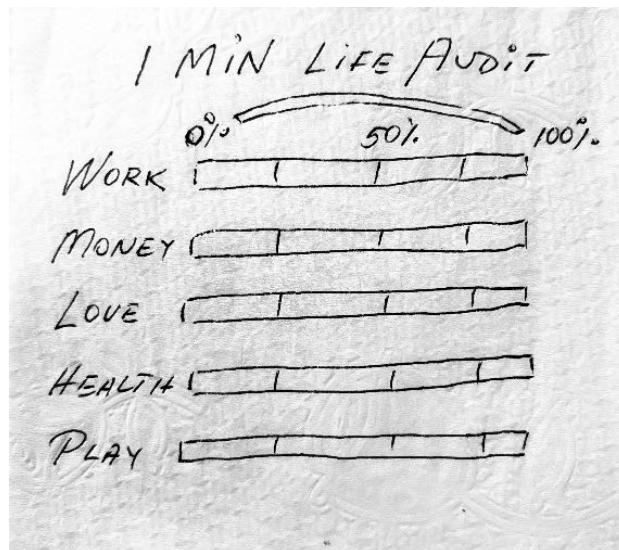
Milton Friedman once wrote that only a crisis, actual or perceived, produces real change.¹

Mine didn't look like a crisis. I was cruising at thirty-six thousand feet with a ginger ale, and I finally paused long enough to look at a napkin that told a story I'd spent years refusing to hear.

The life that looks good and the life that feels good are not the same life.

I had the first. I wanted the second.

Ask yourself right now. Work, Money, Love, Health, Play. How close is each one to 100%? Better yet, draw them on a napkin. Take a photo. One day you may want to look back and remember where you started.



#

A Year Later, A Baja Aha

The napkin showed me the truth but it didn't show me a way out. That took another year, and it happened in the water.

Phil, my husband, and I decided that a vacation is what we both desperately needed, and went to a tiny fishing village in Baja California, where the wind is strong and the WiFi is weak. It turned into an unplanned ten-day digital detox with surprising side effects. To replace the boredom, we decided to learn to kiteboard.

Kiteboarding is trying to steer a kite the size of a minivan while riding a snowboard on the ocean. With strings. And wind. And existential dread.



I felt the fear in every cell of my body and, in a strange way, it was invigorating. I felt alive. My palms were slick, my heart pounding. My instructor shouted over the wind.

“LET GOOOOO!”

She wanted me to loosen my grip on the bar. Relax. Drop my shoulders. Stop fighting the wind.

But letting go doesn't come easily when you've spent your whole life gripping tight, when your identity is built on productivity. Letting go felt like giving up. So, I clenched harder, and the kite yanked me across the water like a rag doll.

“RELAAAAAX!”

Finally, I let go. Not just of the bar, but of the equation I'd been living inside:

Harder = Better

The world went quiet. The kite plopped out of the sky and sat comfortably onto the surface of the sea, pulling me gently downwind by the lines that connected us.

I exhaled. I dropped out of my head and into my body. Just me, the water, and the sky. For the first time in years, I wasn't thinking about what came next. I wasn't optimizing. I wasn't planning.

I was just being.

And that was everything.

The sun warmed my face. And somewhere inside that stillness, the barefoot girl from the Black Sea—the one who played wild and camped on the beach for weeks, the free rebel—smiled back at me.

I had forgotten what being alive feels like. I wanted more of it.

That moment in the Sea of Cortez didn't make me less ambitious. It made me more awake. And it left me with a question I couldn't stop asking.

What if there's another way?

I thought of the concept of Wu Wei, not as lazy "inaction," but as "the path of non-forced action"—flowing organically with the constantly changing streams of life rather than fighting them with brutal, exhaustive friction. I wanted to fit work into my life instead of the other way around and trade the grind for living a full life with more presence, meaning, and aliveness, without burning out, losing myself or sacrificing my impact.

It is possible? I didn't know. Audacious? Certainly.

Default World and Desire Paths

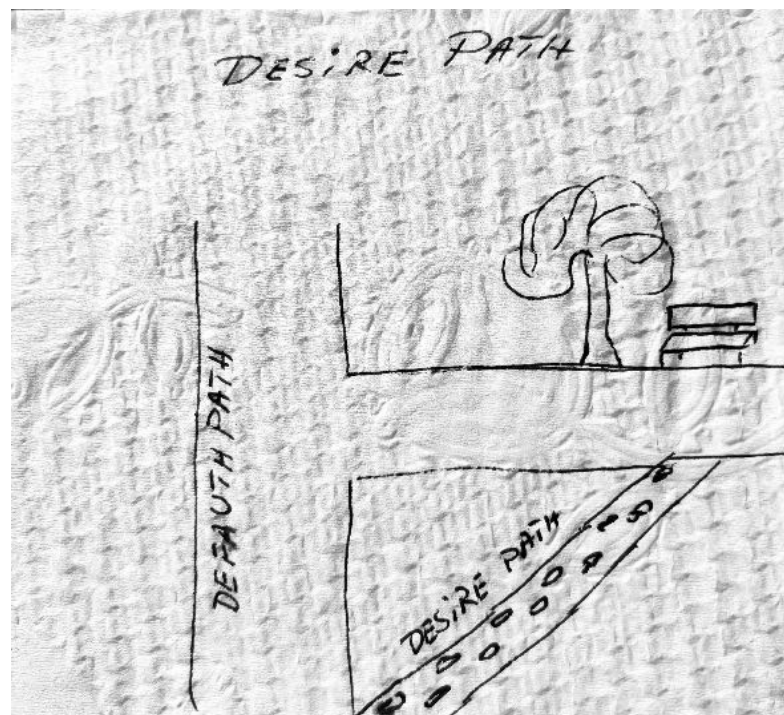
That question sent me down a decade-long rabbit hole. I was curious, determined, and desperate enough to find a satisfactory answer.

I talked to more than three hundred people. High performers, leaders, CEOs, founders, creatives, rebels, pirates, misfits, beach bums, and billionaires. Burnt-out executives making

decent money and doing little real living. Digital nomads with little money and complete freedom over their days. People who walked away from corner offices, people who rebuilt their careers from the inside, people who quit the grind and reclaimed both their fate and their income. People who used the machine to fund an unmachined life. I followed some of them for years.

This isn't a fairy tale. It's ten years of research, failure, and lived experiments, grounded in modern science, behavior change, and ancient wisdom. Along the way, a new way appeared. I call it the Desire Path.

The term *Desire Path* comes from urban planning. A Desire Path is the trail cut across a park lawn where enough feet chose the shortcut over the sidewalk that curves the long way around. Enough people make the same cut, and the grass gives up. A new path appears not because people wanted to break the rules, but because they quit pretending the official route was the best way to where they were headed. A Desire Path is evidence that the default route failed humans.



You're not behind because you haven't hustled enough. You're burnt out on a path that doesn't arrive at your desired destination the way you want.

You can change the path. And in the age of AI, it's more urgent to do that than when I started.

This Book's Argument

This book will go against the norm and challenge your beliefs with counterintuitive ideas. It will ask you to unlearn myths you've followed like religion. To break the rules that are breaking you. To relearn how to flourish in a world that keeps asking for more out of you. To rewire behavior and beliefs. It's a lot. We'll get there together.

Most people think they need to hustle these days in order to make it. This book will show you why your financial security depends more on unhustling and why, in the age of AI, unhustling is your last human advantage, and the most underrated skill in work, wellbeing, and leadership. The human capacities AI can't touch are exactly the ones hustle culture destroys, so unhustling is not only a lifestyle preference for a slower, more intentional life and an anti-hustle rebellion but also a survival strategy. It turns out, slowing down is the smartest possible response to AI. Most people think that AI will make us more efficient. This book will show that if indeed there are any efficiency gains, they don't lead to liberation but to more work.

You may be convinced by now that rest will make you more productive. And that is true. But this book will argue that if we rest to be better at work, this isn't rest, but hustle lying down. And finally, this isn't a book about abandoning ambition. Ambition isn't the problem; the problem is what was done to it.

You should know something about me before we go further. As a former marketer, I helped build the machine I'm now helping you escape. I'm not proud of it. It's exactly why I spent so long working out how to break free. I'd been inside it in a way most people never have. I broke out, and I have the scars to prove it. That means I know where the exits are.

After a career in marketing, along with the awards, the clients, the corner office, I pivoted to build something different: a new way of living, working, leading, and being in a world addicted to doing. In 2021, I brought the Unhustle message to the World Economic Forum and won the People's Stage at Wisdom 2.0. I've since shared it on stages, at leadership conferences, on corporate off-sites, in retreats, virtual trainings, and on more podcasts than I can count. My ambition didn't fade when I unhustled. It got bigger. But I felt more alive. That turned out to be the whole point. You can learn to steer your kite in the direction you choose without killing yourself in the process.

Unhustle is not anti-ambition. It's anti-self-abandonment.

Here's The Route We'll Take

Part I is the diagnosis—how the Default World built a path that's failing most of us. You may be tempted to skip ahead. I suggest you don't. You need to understand the Default Path in order to build the Desire Path. Part II is the way out: seven principles drawn from those three hundred conversations, each one supported by evidence and each closing with a tiny experiment you can try. Each principle includes unlearning and learning, with unlearning being the hardest. You'll be consciously letting go of obsolete habits, assumptions, or outdated knowledge that are no longer serving you. Relearning is the process of rewiring your mental models to apply new,

updated information in a way that generates better results. I've included both in each principle. At the end, you'll find the Unhustle Manifesto, and an invitation to write your own.

Ninety percent of exercises in books are one-night stands with an idea. You close the book moved but wake up identical because the idea didn't change your behavior. This book is different. While it may shift your perspective, it will also give you practices to engage with that are rooted in behavior science for how change happens. A dysregulated nervous system can't insight its way out. You have to regulate it with practical actions. So, I'm asking you to do things, not just agree with things.

What the people in this book have in common isn't that they all worked less. Some ended up working more, on their own terms, in more alignment with their values, interests, biology or season in life. They still wanted the impact. But they swapped the old measure of success—dollars, titles, output—for a truer one. I call it Life Wealth: health, time, connection, experiences, and meaningful work. I'll show you those five dimensions exactly, and the evidence behind each.

You'll also notice illustrations throughout, hand-drawn by me on napkins that cost less than a dollar. I find drawing meditative and I need the break from screens. Southwest Airlines and the Laffer curve both started on napkins, so I figure we're in decent company. As for the quality of the drawing, that's on me. I hope you find some humor in it. We could all use more laughter these days.

Information isn't transformation. We only change by doing. To start cutting your Desire Path, and rewiring old conditioning, you'll need two things: courage and permission. We'll get to

both. I'm not going to tell you to quit your job, blow up your life, or move to Baja. Your Desire Path will be different. That's exactly what makes it yours.

The new American Dream is the freedom to choose how you live. I wrote this for the people ready to claim it. For the rebels, the game changers, and the pioneers. For anyone who refuses to choose between success and sanity, ambition and aliveness, the deadline and dinner at home.

In a world addicted to hustling,
unhustling is a skill, practice, and an act
of rebellion.

It's simple, but it isn't easy. The good news is that you don't have to know where you're going yet, in order to start walking. What's more, you don't have to do it alone. There are thousands of others breaking free from the grind, carving new routes, and figuring it out step by step. If something here speaks to you, share your own story or connect with fellow rebels. Invite your whole team to do it with you. When we link up—swapping wins, struggles, and moments of doubt—the rebellion grows stronger. That's how change happens. Let's support each other in this wild experiment and show up for the kind of life and the kind of work we want to build, together.

Connect at unhustle.com

My rebellion is simple: I will be human.

Welcome to the rebellion.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Milena Regos". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Book *Unhustle: A Rebel's Guide to Escaping the Grind and Living a Full Life*, with a foreword by Chip Conley will be available March 2027. Join the waitlist at unhustle.com/book

PART I: THE DEFAULT PATH

*“The most useful piece of learning for the uses of life
is to unlearn what is untrue.”*

- Antisthenes, adapted from Diogenes Laërtius²

unlearning

/def.:

*To make an effort to forget your usual way of doing something
so that you can learn a new and sometimes better way. ³*

Chapter 1: The Machine You Run On

"There is no salvation in becoming adapted to a world which is crazy."

-Henry Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941)⁴

This chapter is about the machine that keeps us in survival mode, who built it, on purpose, and how it keeps us on the treadmill.

When Work Lost Its Soul

"How do I stop making work my entire world and still survive?" Ann asked me.

When Ann called, she was one click away from becoming a gardener. After twenty years at Whole Foods, supporting an HR department for more than 700 employees, she was staring at a job application for a landscaping company pulled up on her screen. Her finger frozen over "Submit." In one click, her desire would be visible with a timestamp, a desire to trade spreadsheets for soil under her fingertips. Ann is part of the much larger number nobody counts, the ones still inside the machine, one click from leaving it, who never actually click.

Ann built her career believing her hard work would earn the system's loyalty. She's in her early forties, fit, with short brown hair and a smile that lights up a room. On the outside, she looked fine. But I heard the tiredness in her voice, the kind of tired that settles in your bones and makes you want to question everything.

When Amazon bought Whole Foods, the soul left the building. Mission became metrics. The folks who used to geek out over organic tomatoes and farmers' markets were now glued to computer screens with delivery stats. "Do more with less" became the new gospel. One by one,

Ann watched as her co-workers started cracking under the pressure. She felt herself cracking too. Her chest tightened daily. She wondered if it was a sign of a heart attack or just how Millennial life in corporate America feels these days.

Ann was running from the grind, from that hollow desire to escape the mundane treadmill existence, conformism, and failed ambitions. Running from the hopeless emptiness.⁵

Ann's not alone. Millions of people are one click away from quitting to move to a farm and grow tomatoes. Some quit. Marketers become mindfulness teachers. IT professionals become breathwork instructors. Some are being forced out. A total of 97 million people quit their jobs in the U.S. during the two years of the Great Resignation.⁶ It wasn't just a career shift but a collective rejection of toxic workplace productivity and burnout. Millions chose to trade the grind for well-being, flexibility, work-life balance, and actual meaning. Then Quiet Quitting. Now it's Quiet Cracking.⁷ *What if we stopped being so damn quiet about it?* These days I see more loud quitting on Substack than quiet quitting from people who finally realized their job doesn't have their best interests at hand. One survey showed that 70 percent of workers are "job-dropping" and would turn down a job promotion if it meant negatively impacting their mental health or lifestyle.⁸ But not everyone can afford it. And millions are staying put. The causes are systemic: economic uncertainty, increased workload, poor leadership, company restructuring, massive layoffs, crappy pay, robots taking over. But the feeling? That's personal. You know it when you're in it.

Ann knew. She was living it every day.

"I hate this grind," she told me. "I need a different way."

What made it worse is that she'd tried everything already. Therapy. The Harvard Happiness Program. Yale's Science of Well-Being. Podcasts. TED Talks. Her nightstand was a graveyard of self-help books. She could teach a masterclass on emotional intelligence and conscious capitalism. She wanted to talk to her bosses about building a good-for-humans workplace. But she couldn't even recalibrate her own life.

The knowledge was there. The willpower was there. She wanted to spread her energy around, not pour it all into work. She wanted more joy. More of that "mind flow," as she called it. More harmony. But every option seemed to require either giving up everything she'd built or winning the lottery. Old student loans and credit card debt haunted every decision, freezing her with fear. That's the Default Path, paved with good intentions and bad incentives.

"I want to go back to being human," she said. "I want to liberate my life."

I knew exactly what she meant. I'd been there. Trapped. Tired of hustling. Pretending everything was fine, while the gap between my real life and the life I wanted kept getting wider. Maybe you're living in that gap right now, too.

Ann struggled because the promised payoff for her decades of work never materialized. The goalposts kept moving. That's the hidden tax of modern work: you can do everything right and still end up exhausted, in debt, and wondering what it was all for while the regrets, missed opportunities, and life slip silently away. Before I tell you what Ann did, first I want to explain how the machine was designed to extract maximum output without regard for your wellbeing. To understand why, you have to understand who built it.

How We Got Here

“What do you do?” is the first question we ask of strangers. Not “What are you doing this afternoon?” Not “What are you curious about these days?” Not “Where have you traveled to lately?” Your job. Our worth and identity are so tethered to our job that without it, we don’t know who we are. That’s the worth equation most of us are running on.

Busyness = Self-worth.

This identity equation isn't universal. In Mexico, I’ve known people for years before I found out what they do for a living. But in America, we've inherited something deeper than manners. We've inherited the belief that work is our identity and our only salvation. That belief didn't arrive accidentally. It was installed. The Protestant work ethic taught us that exhaustion equals righteousness. We’re still living the same lie that if you're busy, you're worthy. We've built a culture wherein self-destruction is proof of commitment.

The forty-hour workweek has its own origin story. On May 1, 1926, Henry Ford, the founder of Ford Motor Company, reduced his company’s workweek to 40 hours. His motives were economic and self-serving: to reduce turnover and increase productivity and to give workers more leisure time to enjoy the cars they purchase with the money they make. In 1938, The Fair Labor Standards Act made the 40-hour work week a U.S. law. Exactly a hundred years later, that same 40-hour week remains the (theoretical) baseline, even if the work we do has drastically changed. We use our brains, not our brawn. The Industrial "Revolution" (I should say "Devolution") has sold us all a bill of goods, wholesale and en masse, without regard to the human side of the equation.

It built the cage.

We measure success by material metrics and busyness rather than by whole-life wellbeing and happiness. There's a better instrument. I call it Life Wealth. I'll explain it in Part II. It's based on evidence for how to live a deeper, richer, and more productive life, based on five dimensions that hustle culture systematically destroys. When Ann made that shift, everything changed.

The Hundred-Year Trap

Back in 1899, psychologist William James observed the damage of overwork on Americans living “excitedly and hurriedly,” breaking down under the pressure, predicting that the “relaxed and easy worker” would achieve more. But that’s not how the machine operates. In 1905, Max Weber named the disease, when he published *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. Max Weber argued that ascetic Protestantism, especially Calvinism, helped create the “spirit of modern capitalism”. Religious ideas of duty, hard work, and predestination transformed worldly labor into a moral calling, driving individuals to accumulate wealth not for luxury, but as a sign of spiritual grace.

The architect of the machine was Frederick Winslow Taylor, who set out to prove that human beings were merely interchangeable parts of a larger mechanism. In 1911, he published *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which triggered a global productivity revolution.⁹ Taylor was an engineer obsessed with one question: How do we make workers more productive? He studied factory workers with a stopwatch and a cold theory, breaking down every movement,

every task, calculating the most efficient way to perform each action. He turned human beings into cogs in the machine, each one tuned for maximum output. Scientific management became the operating system of modern capitalism. As Harvard's historian Dr. Caroline Elkins points out, this was the dawn of the "cult of efficiency," and we have been running on Taylor's stopwatch ever since.¹⁰

These days, companies use surveillance cameras to track keystrokes, app usage, and browser history to ensure people are sitting at their desks. This is something Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella calls “productivity paranoia.”¹¹ And things are only getting worse with AI creating the Great Productivity Panic. AI is the culmination of a century-long obsession with doing more, faster, cheaper. And we're about to repeat the mistake Taylor's disciples made, only at a scale that would have been unimaginable in 1911.

Today, we have step counters tracking our daily movement, Oura rings optimizing our sleep schedules, and biohacks optimizing our mitochondria. Everything is measured, quantified, optimized, and maxximized.

Hustle culture doesn't just demand overwork, it makes you *want* it.

In 2007, the iPhone moved the office into your pocket. Taylor's stopwatch is now in your hand 24/7. Platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube became digital coliseums where hustle is not only practiced but also celebrated through carefully curated highlight reels of productivity and success. I remember watching Gary Vaynerchuk, aka GaryVee, considered the

godfather of Hustle Culture, insisting that "hustle is the most important word... ever," and "9 to 6 is not enough."¹²

I listened. I watched entrepreneurs on Instagram post about their 4 a.m. wake-ups, their 80-hour weeks, their "no days off" mentality. I followed them. I believed them. If they could do it, why couldn't I? The messages still come from everywhere: business leaders demanding "long hours and high intensity," tech founders calling 60-hour weeks "the sweet spot of productivity," influencers glamorizing late-night work sessions and posting their "rise and grind" morning routines.

Human, not hustle, is the most
important word. Ever.

-unhustle

Decades of psychological and workplace research challenge the assumption that more hours inherently mean more productivity, especially in knowledge-based roles, and suggest that the sweet spot for productivity is closer to 36 hours per week (also supported by 4-day workweek experiments). A comprehensive analysis evaluated the broader economic results of shorter hours. The data concluded that shifting the standard baseline down toward a 36-hour workweek yields substantial net positive welfare and productivity gains, potentially boosting effective GDP by up to 3.6%.¹³

Landmark research by Stanford University economics professor John Pencavel analyzed the precise relationship between hours worked and real output, as a direct counter-argument to Frederick Winslow Taylor's rigid scientific management principles. He discovered that once a worker crosses 50 hours a week, productivity per hour plummets dramatically due to physical and cognitive fatigue. At 56 hours, the drop is so steep that working additional hours produces *zero* additional output. Someone working 70 hours a week produces the exact same amount of total output as someone working 56 hours—meaning those extra 14 hours are entirely wasted human energy.¹⁴

Jack Nevison's meta-analysis, titled "Overtime Hours: The Rule of Fifty," synthesized data from four major productivity studies conducted over a half-century. Published by Nevison, a prominent project management consultant and founder of New Leaf Project Management, the paper establishes a mathematical ceiling on human output. His 'Rule of Fifty' states that pushing an employee's workweek past 50 hours yields zero net productivity gains for the extra time invested. Output plateaus completely or actively regresses. In one of the foundational studies Nevison crunched, a 50-hour workweek resulted in only 37 hours of actual, useful work. When management extended the week to 55 hours, the volume of useful work actually dropped to just

over 30 hours due to severe fatigue, cognitive drain, and escalating error rates. Even in the most hyper-optimized, high-pressure environments monitored (a 1997 study), the absolute maximum cap of human output hit an impenetrable barrier of 52 productive hours, even when employees clocked up to 70 total hours. Nevison also analyzed the variable of time—specifically, how long a human being can try to cheat the rule before collapsing into negative returns: If a team works excessive overtime week after week, their overall output drops by an average of 20 percent after 12 weeks of continuous burnout, and excessive 60-hour weeks cause absenteeism to double and employee turnover rates to triple.¹⁵ Nevison's meta-analysis aligns with other data such as the Circadian Technologies Shiftwork Practices survey, which shows that extended hours elevates costs across five readily addressable vectors: absenteeism, employee turnover, healthcare utilization, excessive overtime, and safety/legal liability boundaries.¹⁶

If work gets better when the hours get shorter, why do we still make it the central axis around which everything else rotates? We stopped calling it exploitation and started calling it ambition. People are working to survive or working because that's the cultural accepted norm.

Hustle culture transformed into a performance art, creating an endless cycle of work glorification. Unlike addiction to alcohol or drugs, work addiction is celebrated. It's considered noble.

-unhustle

In 2018, Alexis Ohanian, co-founder of Reddit, coined the phrase *hustle porn* to describe the glorification of overwork. “Hustle porn,” he said, “is one of the most toxic, dangerous things in tech right now.”¹⁷ He admitted to falling for this dynamic himself during the early days of building Reddit in 2005, later realizing that channeling raw overwork as a substitute for mental healthcare masked a deep period of clinical depression following the death of his mother.

Then in 2019, the World Health Organization classified burnout as an occupational phenomenon and the world agreed we are suffering from a Hustle Hangover: the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual toll of a system that takes your health, time, life, and every minute of your existence while promising you that one day you’ll be able to retire and live a little. Like alcoholism, overwork causes emotional, physical, and social damage. Deep exhaustion, lack of clarity, trouble focusing, anxiety (hangxiety), irritability, depression, memory problems, sleep issues. It also results in substantial economic costs due to lost productivity. We see the results everywhere. Alarming rates of burnout, rise in mental health challenges, high levels of disengagement, loneliness pandemic, existential dread, sleep deprivation. Gen Z is officially the most anxious, stressed, and burned-out generation in history. They are burning out early because they are reacting normally to an inherently unsustainable work culture.

The hustle culture trend taking over Silicon Valley these days and fueled by AI is a replica of China's 996 trend: 9am to 9pm, six days a week. The practice originated in China's tech sector, where 72-hour work weeks were ruled illegal by a court order in 2021 and yet the model is now being imported into American tech culture as if it were a great innovation rather than exploitation.¹⁸ Women with caregiving responsibilities are effectively shut out of roles built around this expectation; you cannot mother a child or care for an aging parent if the job assumes

every waking hour belongs to the office. Hustle culture is alive and well. And tech isn't the only sector grinding people down: health care, marketing, finance, and many others are all suffering from the same grind.

Organizations are betting their balance sheets on AI infrastructure and treating their workforces as the line items that absorb the risk. The idea of the stable 9-to-5 job or secure career is gone. Companies are executing massive layoffs and citing AI as the reason while posting record revenues. Oracle, for example, executed a sweeping restructuring that initial reports estimated cut up to 30,000 jobs by email—a figure later reflected in annual filings as a net loss of 21,000 corporate roles—then handed its new CFO a \$30 million package and posted record revenue.¹⁹ The system rewards companies and the executives who make them leaner and more profitable. Meanwhile, on its way to productivity, AI is increasing anxiety, working hours, and Hustle Hangovers en masse.

This is how we become the ultimate casualties of hustle culture. We are driven to the brink of collapse, yet we don't move. Most of us feel stuck. Stuck between jobs that make us miserable. Stuck between staying on the Default Path and the fear of the unknown. Stuck between two equally impossible options.

My husband gave twenty-three years to a job. The call came on a Friday afternoon: "Your services are no longer needed." It's easy to understand why no one feels their job is secure anymore.

In 1947, with the rubble of World War II still underfoot, Josef Pieper published *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*.²⁰ Germany was rebuilding its bridges and factories, but also its moral and

How We Got Here ~500 years of turning humans into machines	
1300s	<u>Task time.</u> Medieval farmers milk the cows when the cows need milking. The clock doesn't control the work day yet.
1500s	<u>The Reformation.</u> The work-ethic disease is born: exhaustion = righteousness.
1760-1840	<u>Industrial "Devolution."</u> The clock separates us from natural time. The cage is built.
1905	<u>Max Weber names the disease</u> with his book, <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> .
1911	<u>Taylor and his stopwatch</u> determine <i>Principles of Scientific Management</i> . Humans become cogs.
1926	<u>Ford's develops the 40 hour work-week.</u>
1930	<u>Keynes predicts a 15-hour work week by 2030.</u>
2007	<u>The iPhone.</u> The office moves into your pocket. Taylor's stopwatch is now in your hand 24/7.
2012	<u>Hustle-porn era.</u> GaryVee, 4am clubs, no days off.
2019	<u>The WHO classifies burnout</u> as an occupational phenomenon. Caused by work, not by weakness. The hustle hangover gets an official diagnosis.
2021	<u>Chinese courts rule "996" illegal.</u> And Silicon Valley imports it.
2022-2023	<u>4-day week trials</u> prove 36 hours is the sweet spot of productivity. The machine ignores the data.
NOW	<u>The Great Productivity Panic.</u> AI, keystroke surveillance, and layoffs by email. Taylor's mistake is at a scale unimaginable in 1911.
→ Which brings us to here.	

spiritual core. Pieper

asked hard questions

that feel

uncomfortably

current: *Where do*

we go after a time of

crisis? How do we

rebuild a society

damaged by its own

excesses—not

merely humanely,

but humanly, "in

conformity with our

human essence"?

His answer was

audacious then and

feels radical now:

culture is renewed

not by more toil, but

by leisure. Pieper had a term for what you and I are living through now. "*Total work*" is a culture

that collapses our worth into our usefulness and our usefulness into our wages. In such a culture,

effort becomes the only register. Leisure becomes suspicious, a luxury at best and a moral failing

at worst. But leisure, Pieper argued, was the basis of culture, not because it produced outputs that could be priced, but because it produced *humans* who could perceive the good. The point, Pieper reminds us, is not to stop working but to stop being reduced to a mere worker. This feels not only radical, but dangerous. It is dangerous to the machine culture we're living in. And it's the premise of the Life Wealth idea. Unhustling is how we stop being reduced to mere workers.

Hustle culture has two settings. The first one eats you alive—your health, your relationships, your creativity, your time. The second numbs you. It asks you to stop feeling, keep showing up, don't make waves. Both are dangerous. One burns you out. The other hollows you out.

The original meaning of *schola*—the Greek root of our word "school"—is leisure. The Greeks understood what we've forgotten: education happens in free time; learning requires space; culture requires contemplation.

You cannot optimize your way to wisdom. But we've spent a century doing exactly that.

The American Dream, Hijacked

I came to the United States with \$11,431, the exact amount my parents had after selling their house in a bad economy to give me a shot at a better life. I hustled my way to the American Dream through an MBA, through a marketing career, all the way to a seven-figure business. My routine was office, gym, bed, repeat. I told myself it was temporary. Work hard, then life starts. Sacrifice now, security later.

But security is becoming harder and harder to achieve. Housing costs have tripled, wages haven't budged, healthcare can bankrupt you, and food costs more every year. The current

system isn't broken, it's working exactly as designed. Companies extract maximum output, then sell you self-care for the two percent of your life that remains. That's the hustle trap.

From Bulgaria, the dream looked like a door wide open. From inside it, I saw that the door led to a much smaller room than advertised. The American Dream once promised opportunity, equality, and freedom. But over time, it morphed into an endless race for material wealth.

James Truslow Adams coined the phrase "American Dream" in 1931 and immediately warned what would happen to it: "A system that steadily increases the gulf between the ordinary man and the super-rich is assuredly a wasteful and unjust system."²¹ Nobody listened. In 1998, 81 percent of Americans believed they had the opportunity to get ahead. I was one of them. By 2024, only 53 percent did.^{22 23} Adams predicted this in the same decade he invented the term. The richest 1 percent of Americans now own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. Princeton University authors assembled new tax administrative datasets to prove that rich individuals do not just have *more* money but earn significantly higher rates of return on their investments. For fixed-income assets, the interest rate earned by the ultra-wealthy is approximately 3.5 times higher than the average person's yield.²⁴ We are running, but only a few are getting there.

In some European countries, people work but also have a life, four weeks of summer vacation, and time off around Christmas. And they can be *fully* off when not working. To protect workers' time off, and reduce burnout, stress, and sleep problems, the French passed the Right to Disconnect law, giving people permission to avoid looking at work emails after work hours.

In 1930, economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that within a century, people would work fifteen hours a week. Our biggest struggle, he imagined, would be figuring out what to do with all our leisure time, to "pluck the hour and the day virtuously and well."²⁵ I thought about this every time I worked on a weekend. We were supposed to have more time by now. Where did it go? These days, we have the technology to work less, and some business leaders predict we'll soon work 3-day work weeks, but we don't have the permission yet, or for many, the economic ability. Keynes's prediction is only four years away. But instead of approaching 15 hours a week of work, we're heading toward 72.

I'm not asking you to move to France or give everything up to go live as a monk. Unless that's your Desire Path. I'm asking you to see the system clearly, and see that it is designed to create a Default Path for you to follow that doesn't lead to where you want to go. You can't protect yourself from something you can't name. Once you see it, even the smallest act of reclaiming your time, wellbeing, and agency will feel liberating. Each time you eat lunch away from your desk, take an evening for yourself, or spend a weekend without emails will become an act of rebellion. You can still work hard, build companies, lead people. Having ambition doesn't require you to lose yourself. But how you *get there* will change on your Desire Path.

But first, let's talk why the machine doesn't charge everyone the same price. For some of us, the toll is double.

The Double Shift

A recent Women in the Workplace report, the largest corporate study of its kind, claims to diagnose women's careers and argues that women "lack ambition."²⁶ But their own data shows

that women and men are equally ambitious. Young women under 30 are *more* ambitious than their male peers. Latinas are the most ambitious group in the entire dataset. And when women receive the same career support as men, the "ambition gap" completely disappears. In 60 pages of body text analyzing women's career trajectories across 124 companies, the word "childcare" appears zero times. "Eldercare" zero times. "Parenting" zero times. "Caregiving" appears once as a brief aside in a recruitment tactics section, noting that phrases like "work hard, play hard" may deter caregivers from applying. That's it. When the report does acknowledge that 25 percent of women who don't want to be promoted cite "personal obligations" as the reason, versus 15 percent of comparable men, it uses that phrase exactly: personal obligations. No analysis. No context. No naming of what those obligations are. In fact, across 37 countries, women take on 75% of childcare responsibilities.²⁷ As care economist Blessing Adesiyan puts it in her Substack: "The problem is not ambition. The problem is the absence of support."²⁸ The ambition gap is corporate speak for, *We made no effort to accommodate half of the population, and then when they dropped out, we blamed women for it.*

The report itself acknowledges that "women with partners were more than three times as likely as men with partners to be responsible for all or most housework." In 2003, women performed an hour more of daily domestic work than men. By 2024, that gap closed down to 40 minutes more. At this current rate of progress, sociologists calculate that domestic housework will not reach a true 50/50 gender equality split until roughly the year 2066.²⁹ And it's not just caregiving. In dual-income households, women manage 71 percent of the mental load—the scheduling, planning, organizing tasks.³⁰ Everything that keeps the household running. Sociologists call this "gendered cognitive stickiness," the phenomenon where household

management remains glued to women even if they out-earn their partners.³¹ The Women in the Workplace report shows that only 21 percent of entry-level women are encouraged to use AI compared to 33 percent of men. The very tool that can lessen the load for the group carrying the load is being encouraged least to use it. As one of my Substack readers said: “This gap isn’t about interest, but having permission and understanding that there are tools that will lessen the load. Women need to come together and get rid of the stigma.”

Women are leaving in massive numbers because the workplace doesn’t allow for people to have lives outside work. More than 455,000 women left the US workforce in the first eight months of 2025. Forty-two percent cited caregiving as the reason including the high cost of caregiving. More than a third (37 percent) of the women who voluntarily left the workforce operated in jobs that entirely refused schedule flexibility, compared to only 22 percent of women who chose to stay in their roles.³² Women can’t function in a structure designed for someone who has no caregiving responsibilities, no domestic load, and a body that will never be pregnant. Of course, it looks like women are leaning out instead of leaning in. In reality, they are taking their income and security into their hands. They're opting out of a rigged game and opting into taking control of their income, health, and future. Female entrepreneurs are starting 49 percent of all new businesses. That’s a 69 percent increase from 2019 to 2024.³³ As traditional corporate environments aggressively clamped down on remote work and flexible hours, women increasingly abandoned secondary corporate side hustles to build dedicated, sovereign business entities of their own. Women are not retreating from ambition. They're relocating it.

We raised a generation of women to believe that if they checked every box and over-delivered, the system would rise to meet them. It never did. The fairytale had no architecture.

-unhustle

I have known thousands of accomplished women, who have optimized everything except the question of whether any of it is the life they wanted. What I have rarely known is a woman at rest. A woman who isn't performing her worth. Who says no without a paragraph of justification. Who takes up space without shrinking to make room. Who has stopped auditioning for a life she already has. A woman who can relax without guilt or shame.

For years I was the achiever, the fixer, the perfectionist, the one who could always do more, and I mistook the adrenaline for aliveness. I abandoned myself a hundred small times a day and called it ambition. I'm learning to be her now. Slowly. Badly, some days. But learning.

I chose not to have children, in part because without family nearby to help and without adequate parental leave, I couldn't see how to be both the parent and the professional I wanted to be. The math never worked for me personally. In Bulgaria, during communism, my mom had three years of paid maternity leave for my brother and three more for me, with her job guaranteed when she returned. The U.S. is the only rich nation without federally mandated paid maternity leave. When I spoke about this to a room packed with female leaders, the silence in the room was deafening. Every woman in that room was doing her own version of that math.

If you're a man reading this section, I'm not blaming you. I'm describing a system. We're running a 21st-century economy on a 1950s operating system designed for households with stay-at-home wives. The operating system is obsolete. But we keep running it anyway. And it hurts *everyone*.

Hey, partners of working women: unhustling means stepping up at home as an equal, conscious co-owner. The revolution starts in your kitchen before it reaches your office.

For some men, the grind culture message is to work hard and succeed. For white women: work hard, do the second shift at home, and maybe succeed. For Black women, immigrants, and people of color, there's a compound tax: work harder than everyone else and prove yourself repeatedly, manage both gender and racial stereotypes, make everyone comfortable with your presence, and even then, negotiate for what others are given.

This isn't just a woman's issue. The machine eventually minimizes everyone's humanity.

The Money Question

You're reading a book about unhustling, and somewhere in the back of your mind, a voice is whispering: *What about money?* It's the single biggest barrier preventing smart, capable people from making the changes they desperately need. About 90 percent of Americans report that money impacts their stress levels.³⁴ I'm no exception. We all need money for food, health care, and bills.

Before we go further, a distinction worth naming. There are two kinds of hustle.

Status Hustle is working sixty-plus hours even though you're financially comfortable. It's chasing validation that never quite feels like enough. Status hustle isn't about ambition. It's about the inner voice that says: *You don't deserve to want what you want until you've proven yourself worthy.* So you keep achieving. Keep measuring up. Keep comparing. But the inner judge never says "enough." Because its job isn't to free you. Its job is to keep you safe by making you acceptable to your partner, to your boss, to society. So you end up living anxiously focused on whether you're measuring up, instead of whether you're living.

Survival Hustle is working multiple jobs because you have to. Working sixty-plus hours to keep food in the fridge. Side hustle on top of a 9-to-5. This is systemic: created by inequality, stagnant wages, the economy, and a safety net full of holes. It's a real problem, and this section won't solve it.

Survival Hustle is economic. Status Hustle is existential. Both keep you hustling. Only one is solved by more money. But the argument that follows applies to both: hustle, in every form, is more expensive than you think. Overwork provides short-term revenue at the cost of long-term wellbeing, stability, and deferred life enjoyment.

A landmark 2010 study by Nobel Prize-winners Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton revolutionized psychology by dividing our well-being into two distinct categories: Life Evaluation (how you feel about your life overall when you sit back and think about it) and Emotional Well-Being (the day-to-day emotional quality of your lived experience, like joy, stress, sadness, and affection).³⁵ Their original data suggested that while Life Evaluation rises steadily alongside income, Emotional Well-Being hits a hard ceiling, showing no further progress in daily happiness beyond approximately \$75,000. This research has since been refined. While Kahneman's early data pointed to a flatline, a newer study by Matthew Killingsworth found that happiness continues to climb indefinitely. In a recent joint adversarial collaboration, the researchers discovered that both findings are true depending on a person's baseline emotional health.³⁶ Money does stop buying daily happiness at an inflation-adjusted threshold of roughly \$100,000—but only for the least happy 20 percent of the population. If an individual is suffering from clinical depression, heartbreak, or deep bereavement, scaling their income past six figures

will not alleviate those specific miseries. For the remaining 80 percent of us, more money continues to bring less daily stress and more life satisfaction. Yet because this progress scales logarithmically, the financial cost of chasing your next tiny drop of happiness becomes exponentially higher. Going from \$50,000 to \$100,000 gives you a certain boost; to get that exact same tiny boost again, you have to leap from \$100,000 to \$200,000, and then from \$200,000 to \$400,000. Chasing exponentially more millions for microscopic returns in daily happiness is a terrible trade-off if it requires trading away your finite time, relationships, and health. There inevitably comes a point of diminishing returns where accumulating more money stops buying you time, health, love, or peace of mind. You don't have to be a millionaire to liberate your life. You just have to stop mistaking money for the whole score.

Now, let's talk about the actual financial risk. It doesn't come with unhustling. The real financial risk is hustle. Here's why.

Hustle makes you expensive. I was spending six thousand dollars a year managing overwork's consequences. Medical bills. Sick days when I couldn't work. Acupuncture appointments to help me deal with stress related issues: depleted adrenal glands, digestive issues, yin deficiency. Takeout because I was too busy to cook. Ubers to meetings. Parking tickets when I was running late. Mistakes I had to redo. That money is the tax your pace of work charges your bank account. For me, it could have added up to more than \$262,000 over twenty years if invested at a conservative seven percent annual return.

Hustle makes you underperform. Research shows that cognitive function drops measurably after fifty hours of work per week. Economist John Pencavel at Stanford found that output per hour

declines steeply after 49 hours per week, and beyond 55 hours, additional hours produce virtually no additional output.³⁷ While John Pencavel's landmark productivity study analyzed data from British munition workers during the First World War rather than modern office environments, its core biological truth remains unassailable: the human brain and body have fixed, structural limits. When scheduled hours cross a fifty-hour weekly threshold, the curve flattens dramatically. The most striking data point comes from research into the construction industry: a project operating on a 70-hour work week for seven weeks saw weekly performance drop 14 percent below standard.³⁸ When management shut down all operations for a single Sunday, the next week's performance jumped nearly back to baseline. A single day of rest recovered two weeks of productivity losses. The data proved the 60-Hour Cliff. When a work schedule of 60 or more hours per week is continued for longer than approximately two months, an extraordinary inversion occurs. The cumulative drop in human efficiency becomes so severe that the completion date of the project is delayed *beyond* what would have been achieved by keeping the exact same crew on a basic, healthy 40-hour workweek.

Hustle keeps you stuck. This is the most insidious cost. The world is changing faster than any of us can keep up with. Skills that guaranteed stable careers five years ago are becoming obsolete. AI is transforming entire industries. To stay competitive, you need continuous learning. New skills. Technical fluency. But when do you develop those skills while you're working sixty-hour weeks to keep up? You don't. The person who works sustainably has energy and capacity left over to explore, experiment, and build optionality. They see the iceberg coming. And they have time to steer.

Unhustling is not about making less money. It's about making money without making yourself the collateral damage. That's what Ann wanted to do. That's what most of us want.

Your financial security in the AI era depends *more* on unhustling, not less. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report is clear that technical skills—AI, big data, cybersecurity—are the fastest-growing skills employers want. But it also identified the fastest-growing non-technical skills by 2030: creative thinking, resilience, flexibility, agility, leadership and social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning.³⁹ Human skills. Not execution skills. In fact, the accounting firm Ernst & Young announced giving away bonuses to employees who can demonstrate human skills. After years of companies offering cash incentives and push vectors to force employees to learn generative AI, EY's \$100 million initiative is explicitly designed to reward the qualities AI *cannot* replicate: adaptability, critical innovation, leadership, and human judgment.⁴⁰ And they are not alone. KPMG overhauled its baseline auditing track to center completely on human critical thinking over automated data processing, and PwC U.S. rolled out an extensive curriculum explicitly elevating human empathy alongside software skills.

Execution can be hustled, but human skills cannot. You cannot outwork a machine at raw output, speed, or volume. If your primary value is your ability to endlessly grind, you are competing directly with an algorithm that never sleeps, never burns out, and costs pennies to run.

The companies that bet otherwise are already paying for it. Ford rehired hundreds of experienced engineers to fix quality problems its automated systems couldn't diagnose. Commonwealth Bank of Australia laid off customer service staff, replaced them with an AI voice bot, watched call volume increase, and reversed course.⁴¹ They are not alone. A survey by

Orgvue found that 55 percent of business leaders who made AI-related redundancies now admit those decisions were wrong. Organizations that eliminated human expertise for algorithms ultimately spent \$1.27 in hidden recovery friction costs for every \$1.00 they initially saved on raw payroll.⁴²

Human skills aren't a soft alternative to technical ones. They're the exact capacities that make technical skills useful and the foundation that has to exist before AI has anything real to work with. And these are precisely the capacities chronic overwork systematically destroys. You can't build resilience while running on empty. To be curious, you must have the time to wander. Creative thinking does not happen in a state of chronic exhaustion; it requires cognitive margin, white space, and play. Resilience, agility, and curiosity cannot be forced through a 14-hour workday; they are the natural byproducts of a rested, emotionally regulated mind. To lead and influence, you must have the emotional capacity to deeply connect. By slowing down and unhustling, you aren't falling behind. You are cultivating the exact un-automatable human qualities that AI can never replicate. In a world optimized for automated speed, your premium value lies in your deeply human slowness.

You can't out-execute AI. But you can
out-think it, out-create it, out-relate it,
out-feel it. Your humanity is your
competitive advantage. Don't let Hustle
Culture exhaust those abilities.

-unhustle

So, back to the money question, when is enough, enough?

Enough is not a number. Enough is the point where money stops serving your life and starts running it. Enough is the number that funds your Life Wealth portfolio. Not the number that makes the inner judge say you've arrived. Not the number that finally and permanently proves your worth to the people watching. The number that covers your health, your time, your connections, your experiences, and comes from doing meaningful work, and not much more. That number is different for everyone. But it's almost certainly lower than you've been told, and almost certainly lower than the number Hustle Culture is pointing you toward. In the words of Lao Tzu: "If you know when you have enough, you are wealthy."⁴³

We have to look at money as a means, not an end. When money becomes the only score, we develop a kind of metric myopia by measuring the one thing that's easy to count and missing everything that actually counts. The goal is not less ambition. The goal is ambition that doesn't burn the person carrying it.

Three months after our initial conversation and our coaching sessions, Ann did something that surprised me. She didn't become a consultant or a coach. She didn't even quit Amazon. She stepped into a new role that let her spend more time doing what she enjoyed and allowed her to work remotely. She left Miami for a smaller Kentucky town with a lower cost of living and found a house she could afford, with a big yellow poplar out front, and a garden out back. She prioritized long-deferred health decisions. She married her partner and adopted a puppy. The last time we spoke, she was beaming. She'd spent the morning in her garden, something impossible during her Miami years, and was planning a three-day camping weekend without her laptop.

Breaking free isn't easy. But it's possible. Even if you don't quit. And the principles she used, the ones I'll cover in Part II, work at every income level, even if the specific tactics differ. Everyone has different circumstances and paths.

The Default Path was built by someone else, long before you showed up. Naming it is the first step to walking away. Unhustling starts when you see the machine for what it is and stop being surprised when it takes from you exactly what it was designed to take. Ann saw it. Now you're seeing it too. You have a choice—whether to stay on the Default Path or cut a new one through the grass, a new way to live, work, and lead.

As we'll explore in the next chapter, the stakes aren't just high. Sometimes, they're life or death.

The Book *Unhustle: A Rebel's Guide to Escaping the Grind and Living a Full Life*, with a foreword by *Chip Conley* will be available March 2027. Join the waitlist at unhustle.com/book

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