

Transcript

TPL Episode 47

The Seven Stages of Finding Your Calling

Jeff Goins: Every lesson that you learn, everything that you do, every attempt that ends in failure is actually just another step in the process that gets you where you're going.

Andy Traub: Welcome to The Portfolio Life with Jeff Goins. I'm your host, Andy Traub, and this is the show that helps you pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice.

Is there a formula to finding meaningful work, or is it a process? One that takes longer for some to get through than others, but leads all who go through it to a place of more clarity and purpose. On this episode, Jeff and I talk about his newest book, "The Art of Work." He goes deep into the specifics of the journey he believes we must all go on to find work that gives meaning to our lives and improves the world we live in. If you're seeking meaningful work, then you're going to love this episode of The Portfolio Life.

Jeff, I know you're a big fan of "Lord of the Rings."

Jeff Goins: I am.

Andy Traub: And there's so many things that are consistent in those movies.

Jeff Goins: And books.

Andy Traub: And books, sorry.

Jeff Goins: It was actually just one book.

Andy Traub: Just one book.

Jeff Goins: It's one book. "Lord of the Rings" is one book broken up into three parts. Anyway, back to you.

Andy Traub: One of the things, and this is what makes for a great book and movies, is the surprises along the way. There's lessons they learn along the way to their final destination, and your book, "The Art of Work", which you can find out more, folks, at ArtOfWorkBook.com, near the end you have something that is really helpful for all of us, and I found these each very fascinating. We're going to talk about each one, and that's the seven stages and accompanying lessons. It's really a summary of the book, so we're going to give folks, if you haven't read the book already, a real insight into them. These could each be an hour-long conversation. We're not going to do that. We're going to do them all in about 20, 25 minutes. I'm going to give you the name, and then just tell us about them.

The first is, within "The Art of Work", the context of "The Art of Work", awareness.

Jeff Goins: Yes, so each of these stages is basically a big idea in the book and one of the chapters in the books. One of the things that I learned in pursuing my own calling and also

hearing so many stories from other people who found their life's work was debunking this myth that you just know. You don't just know. Everybody I talk to, at least 99% of the people I talk to, don't just know what they're supposed to do with their lives, and it is a cruel taunt for successful people to say, "Well, I just knew that I was supposed to be a firefighter or a banker or an online entrepreneur ever since I was four years old," because most of us, I think, don't feel that way. We feel like we're somewhere in that messy middle that people talk about where you're not young enough to start over and you're not old enough to have the wisdom of, "Oh man, I lived my life well." You feel kind of in what I call the in-between. You're in that place where you don't really know what you're supposed to be doing, and so in this stage, the stage of awareness, you have to develop a sense of what you're supposed to be doing in life.

Frederick Buechner talks about this, and he calls it "listening to your life." I love that idea that your life is speaking, you just need to be able to recognize the signs. Another guy named Parker Palmer, an author and activist, said, "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it," I think this is where a lot of people get it wrong. They think you have to have some big plan. "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I need to listen to my life. I need to hear what it's telling me about who I am." Parker Palmer has a great book about that, "Let Your Life Speak," and in that book, it's sort of this memoir of vocation where he goes through these different stages of life and goes, "I tried this and it didn't work, but it taught me that I'm supposed to do this. I tried that, and it didn't quite work, but it taught me that I'm supposed to be doing that."

I think most of us feel that way, and in the way that you find your life's work is not by having some epiphany and going, "Okay, I know what I need to do." It's really this process of learning how to listen, paying attention to the signs, and then taking intentional action as you're doing that.

Andy Traub: Most of us right now are in that process, and what you're saying is, "Don't discount that it's hard. Pay attention that you're learning. Be more aware."

Jeff Goins: This is a skill that you'll use for the rest of your life. I'm still listening to my life. You and I had a conversation recently just between the two of us where you were saying, "What are you excited about for this year?" My honest answer was, "I don't know." I'm just trying to pay attention to the things that excite me and the things that drain me, and I want to do more things that excite me and that's taking some intentional reflection for me to look back on last year and then look forward to the rest of this year and go, "Okay, what did I learn? What did I try in the past season of life that didn't quite work? How can I apply that lesson to the next thing that I do?"

The idea of the stage of awareness is this is something that starts at a certain point when you really become more aware of what you aren't supposed to be doing and what you are supposed to be doing, and then you begin to intentionally act on what you know. I think this is really helpful for those of us who are afraid that we have to wait for clarity, that we have to wait for some shining light from heaven and the voice of God or something echoing in our ears for us to know what to do with our lives. The clarity comes with action. You have to listen to your life, look back at the things you

have learned, see the things that are familiar and consistent resonate with your passion, as well as the needs of the world and your own skill set, and then figure out how you can turn around and apply that to the journey ahead of you.

Andy Traub: Right, and we talked about this in another episode about how you figured out what you were going to write about for this book, and it was simply awareness. You knew what needed to happen next because you're aware. Every great relationship happens because two people are aware of each other, so after awareness, we need to have awareness, what happens next?

Jeff Goins: The next stage is apprenticeship, and I call this an accidental apprenticeship. Basically the idea here is that every story of success is really a story of community. In other words, we don't get to where we're going alone, so this idea that there are self-made men and women, people who just knew what they were supposed to do, they formed a plan, and they went after it and they succeeded. That's just not true. If that does happen, it's certainly the exception to the rule. The rule, it seems, is that we are the products of our environments and the people that come alongside us at just the right time help us get where we're going, and so the idea of an accidental apprenticeship is instead of, "The teacher appears when the student is ready," which is this cliché that we hear people say, I actually think that the teachers are always around us, and they often come when we least expect.

If you think about the great stories, if you think about "Star Wars", the classic heroes journey tale, Luke Skywalker is aware. He's in some way prepared for what's to come, but on the other hand, he's not quite ready. Obi-Wan Kenobi comes and says, "We need to go do this. We need to go to Alderaan," and I'm revealing some of my geekiness here. I know all too much about "Star Wars."

Andy Traub: Almost all of it, right?

Jeff Goins: Yes, "You've got to come with me to Alderaan and learn the ways of the Force and become a Jedi like your father," and Luke goes, "No. No, I can't do that," and he doesn't actually act until he has to, when he goes back home and realizes that the Empire's come and desecrated his home and killed his aunt and uncle, and so he's forced into the story, which is often how stories happen, great stories happen, so an accidental apprenticeship is that. It doesn't feel like you randomly approaching somebody and saying, "Hey, mentor me," it's really the process of, as we listen to our lives, who are the people that are already in our life that can be helping guide us into the place where we feel called to go, even sometimes a place where we don't necessarily want to go, but the place that we're supposed to go with our skills, our passions, and our talents as we offer them to the world.

Andy Traub: Awareness, apprenticeship, and all apprenticeships involve work, and you call this practice?

Jeff Goins: Not just any kind of practice. This is the third stage. This is painful practice, and I intentionally chose that moniker because there are different terms for it. Some

people call it deliberate practice. That's the research term for it that was coined by a guy named K Anders Ericsson. If you're familiar with the Ten Thousand Hour Rule, which is a phrase that Malcolm Gladwell coined in his book, "Outliers," K Anders Ericsson is really the guy behind that, the researcher behind that idea of studying these world-class performers and realizing that there was this norm number of at least 10,000 hours of practice before people basically reached expert level status in their talent.

Painful practice is basically this idea that really hard work kind of hurts. It's not easy. Think about working out, I think about when I was in sixth grade training for the spelling bee, I ended up winning the spelling bee in sixth grade.

Andy Traub: You did?

Jeff Goins: Oh, yes. The winning word was acquiescence. I beat an eighth grader. He called on the school bus ride home.

Andy Traub: Because you were taunting him with larger words.

Jeff Goins: I felt pretty good about that.

Andy Traub: Spell that, punk.

Jeff Goins: He could have totally beaten me up, so I felt like I triumphed as the kid who was bullied throughout most of middle school. I felt like a big man that day.

Andy Traub: In reference to practice, you practiced and it was really hard?

Jeff Goins: Two hours a night every night, I would go down to the basement and I memorized every single one of those words. I didn't even know what some of them meant. I didn't know what acquiescence meant, but I knew what that word looked like in my mind, so when they said it, I knew what it looked like in my mind.

Anyway, this is the idea that if you're called to do something, you're also called to do it well, really well. Greatness is the process of showing up, doing work to the point of utter exhaustion, and then getting up tomorrow and doing it all over again. There's interesting research about this. Ericsson, who I mentioned earlier, basically says that if you're going to engage in this kind of practice, it has to be not inherently motivating. In other words, it can't be fun, which is sort of odd when you think about it, because you're talking about this thing that you love and your passion, but we're talking about doing something with excellence, and anybody who's pursued a hobby beyond the extent of it being fun knows that it eventually stops becoming fun. This is the place where I think you not only get really good at what you do, you figure out if this is what you're supposed to be doing.

I believe, and I think the stories and the books support this, is that if you can do something to the point that it's not fun to do necessarily, doesn't fill you up with

butterflies, but the work is worth doing, and you do it to the point where you can't do it anymore and you have to collapse and get some rest and then go back to it the next day, you can do this repetitively and actually get joy out of it, you can keep doing it and sustain it, this is really the mark of a calling versus a hobby. I experienced this as a musician. Ever since I was sixteen years old and I learned how to play the guitar, I thought, "Man, I just want to do this professionally," and then I ended up doing it professionally for a year, and I spent that whole year playing shows, living the life. I didn't hate it, but I was like, "I don't want to keep doing this."

I was talking to a friend of mine who's a bass player in another band, and he said, "Man, if I could do anything, I would just play music all day." In my mind, as soon as he said that, I just thought this. I said, "I would just do something else if I could play music," and that to me was a sure sign that I wasn't supposed to be doing it. I still play music, I still love music, but it wasn't the thing. Incidentally, that year that I was traveling playing music, any time I had a free moment, I wasn't practicing my guitar. I was writing, so practice is not only the means by which you get good at something, it's also the way that you learn what you're supposed to be spending your time doing.

Andy Traub: The next one is discovery.

Jeff Goins: Right, so this is sort of the moment. When I was writing this book, I kept moving these stages around, because I think that they all build on each other and in some ways happen concurrently. They're overlapping. In other words, as you start listening to your life, you're probably going to become more aware of accidental apprenticeships that are happening to you, the multiple mentors around you, not the one person that is giving you information and advice, but you realize, "Man, I learned this from this person at this stage in life, but I'm also learning from this person right now, and this guy over here, we're friends, but we're teaching each other stuff every week." That's all part of the accidental apprenticeship process, and so that continues, and as you're engaging in those relationships, you're learning the things that you should practice and what real work, real skill acquisition looks like. As you're doing all of that, I think you become more aware to the point that you begin to discover. I kind of like thinking of it as uncovering the thing that you're supposed to do, and it is this process that not of epiphany, but of action. This is the point where you realize even when you're doing all this stuff, it still feels kind of fuzzy. I believe that clarity comes with action.

Mother Teresa once said, "I've never had clarity. I've only ever had trust," and look at the life that she led based on trust, not some incredible light bulb moment in her head. She did have an experience where she felt like she received a call within a call, where she was on a train one day after being a nun and a school teacher for years, she realized that she was called to go work amongst the poor. What's interesting about that story is the first call that she responded to was the call to be a nun, to enter into a convent, go through that whole process, and had she not taken that first step, she never would have taken the second and the successive steps after that.

Discovery is really about the process of, "How do I get to where I'm going?" A lot of people think of this as taking a giant leap, and I don't think that's true. I think that as I

began to examine the stories that I covered in this book, and then I looked at Walt Disney and Mother Teresa as another example. These people weren't taking giant leaps. They were taking steps, and over time, they built a bridge to where they were called to be. The way that you build a bridge is by showing up every day, doing whatever work is required of you, and slowly moving in the right direction.

In the book, I tell the story of a couple, Ben and Christie Carlson, who are running this coffee company in Burundi, the second poorest country in the world, and the way that they got there, they describe it as a leap, but when I actually kind of dug deep into their story, I said, "How long did this leap take?" They said, "Well, about ten years."

Andy Traub: That's some serious slow-mo.

Jeff Goins: Yes, that's a slow-mo leap. When you and I talk about this Andy, I think we're thinking three to six months or sooner.

Andy Traub: I talked to people forever. It took three months for me to clarify this.

Jeff Goins: Yes, so discovery is really the process by which you move into the thing that you're supposed to do. It will happen more slowly than you want it to, but that's not really up to you. What's up to you is to show up every day and begin building that bridge piece by piece, and if you do that work, eventually you'll get to where you're supposed to go.

Andy Traub: What I think is really powerful about this idea of discovery, Jeff, is that you really helped us clarify that while other people might be able to communicate to you about your gifts and calling and things like that, you have to go discover it yourself. A lot of times people ask you, "What should I do?" And you go, "I can't discover for you. You have to discover it yourself," and so what it does is, and your book has done this for so many people, is it equips the reader to go find and discover that thing, whatever their thing is, and understand this is a process, and discovery was the fourth one.

There's three more. The next one is profession. This sounds hopeful, like we're getting closer.

Jeff Goins: Yes. This is really about this idea of turning pro, so if the last stage is about taking a leap, whatever that might look like, this is about, "How do I do this and be taken seriously?" Obviously involved in that is the opportunity to get paid, but it means so much more than that. A professional is somebody who doesn't look like an amateur; they look like they know what they're doing. This stage is full of failure. This is no longer an idea.

Andy Traub: I just keep waiting for these to get easy. Step one is really difficult. Step two, there's a lot of failure and a lot of trial, and three, this is where it gets hard, and four. We're on step five, and it still involves failure, but we've turned pro. Is that the difference?

Jeff Goins: Yes. Basically, the mark of a professional is that they embrace failure. In the book, I tell the story of a guy named Matt McWilliams who was certain that he was going to become a golf pro. He was good enough to do that, and then he got hurt to the point that he really couldn't continue playing without having to do some major, major surgery, and that was sort of the epiphany for him where he realized, "Yeah, I'll just go something else. I don't want to do that," so he ended up working at a golf course with his dad, working for his dad, and started teaching golf lessons, and after spending some time on the side building web sites, doing other things, chasing other passions, still doing this, not loving it, it was kind of too easy for him. He had a tough conversation with his dad, which he remembers the date, because it was, as he told me, the day after his birthday, and his dad said, "You're fired."

Andy Traub: Does this book have hope in it? Does this get better? Is there a unicorn for number seven?

Jeff Goins: I think the idea here is that it's real. This wasn't the only devastating failure that Matt experienced in his professional life. It was the first of three, really. He went from that to joining this start-up company and becoming the top guy in the company in his early twenties, and got too big for his britches and was the guy that people feared getting caught in the hall with because he was a perfectionist, and so people would run into him in the hall and they would just try to hide or whatever, because he was just really driven and really ambitious. He helped start the company, and founders basically sat him down and said, "This isn't working," and let him go from that, and that was the second time that he got fired.

Later on, he ended up working for another company and did really great work, and he got laid off from that. That was the point, this was nearly a decade, it was many years of failure, what felt like failure, but what ended up being preparation for the thing that was to come. Now, he's this sought after consultant, gets to live the life that he dreamed of living, and he looks back on these experiences and he realizes that in every step of the way, in every failure, he learned something about himself that he then applied to the next season. He learned that he wasn't cut out to play golf. That was too easy for him, it was sort of boring, and teaching it was even more boring. He loved creating things, but he also learned how to not be a jerk. He learned that he loved working with people and helping them succeed, and each step of the way, he learned something about himself.

What's interesting about this is when you read biographies of people like Benjamin Franklin or even Steve Jobs or I mentioned earlier Mother Teresa, you see this theme in a lot of their lives where there's basically this season of failure, or sometimes just sort of invisibility, insignificance, where they're just kind of doing the work to get to where they want to be. You can think of it as an apprenticeship, but what we do with failure is essential to whether or not we actually find our calling.

There's two ways to look at failure. One is to look at it as this devastating blow that tells you, "Don't try this again. Get in line." This is the voice of fear that's trying to put you in your place. The other way of looking at failure, the way that I try to look at it,

and the way that these people that succeeded in life and found their callings definitely look at it, is to look at it at what I call the pivot point. I'm borrowing a term from basketball, which at 5'7", 5'8" when I'm wearing heels ... That's right, I wear heels. I'm not a basketball guy, but there's this beautiful move in basketball where once you run out of all your options and you've got one foot planted and another foot in front of you, you still have what's called a pivot. You can still have one foot planted, and then the other can basically move in any direction. You can't take a step forward, but you can do a full 360, and that's called a pivot.

Failure is the point at which you feel stuck. You feel like, "I've got to give up. I've got to go back and start all over again," and yet what's often true is failure is the point at which you feel like you're stuck and you can't move in any direction, and yet you still have one ace up your sleeve. You can still pivot. You can move in any direction you choose, and then pass the ball, kind of change directions and move on to the next thing. The beautiful thing about that is every lesson that you learn, everything that you do, every attempt that ends in failure, is actually just another step in the process that gets you to where you're going.

Andy Traub: Profession mastery.

Jeff Goins: We've been talking about the thing. I said my playing guitar wasn't the thing, and I think of writing as my thing now, but mastery is this idea. The conventional idea of mastery is you need to be great at what you do, and we talked about that in practice. Practice is a means to mastery, but typically, we think of mastery as pick one thing and just do it for the rest of your life and you can become a master at it. I consistently hear people, I think we all run into people and are those people ourselves sometimes, where we go, "What if I have more than one passion? What if there's more than one thing I want to do? What if I feel like I have many callings?"

My experience, and the research that I did, seems to suggest that that's the norm, that mastery isn't about being a jack of all trades. You can spread yourself too thin, but it's about being a master of some. Robert Greene in his book, "Mastery", says that the future belongs to people who combine interesting skills in unique ways. There's this idea, and I think we see this in technology, we're seeing this in the business world, there is this trend that's emerging that the way that we master our craft is really by getting a bunch of things that we're pretty good at and bringing them together into a portfolio, and this where the idea of Portfolio Life comes from, bring it together into a portfolio that is your life, the many facets of the things that you do and the way that you live your life, and that portfolio is the thing that you master. That is the thing that you do better than anybody. It's not that you're just a writer, it's you're a writer who also loves pop culture and has an affinity for guacamole or something, and when you bring all that together, it creates this very unique voice, and that is the thing that you do better than anyone else, and that is the thing that you spend your life mastering, but it is a portfolio, not a single activity.

Andy Traub: I hope people find freedom in hearing that, Jeff, because there is this pressure of, "I have this one spot I have to hit and I have to kill everything else so I can follow this

one thing." The reality is, we are multi-dimensional people, and so why not bring all of those things that we're good at. The mastery of some, I love that. The last is legacy.

Jeff Goins: Legacy is this idea that your calling is not something that you ever complete. I remember having a conversation with a friend when I was writing this book, and he said, "What if my calling is just to have my two kids and they're going to go do great stuff, and I'm kind of done. I'm 40 years old, and the rest of life is just gravy." I get that, but that feels kind of depressing, I think. Everything after this could be downhill, and as a parent, I get it. I feel like one of the most significant things I've ever done is have our child. I want to be a good dad, and if nothing else, if I can raise our son up to live a great life, I'll feel like I spent my time well, but I also think that that's not it. You're not just a dad, you're not just a mom, you're not just a writer or a Podcaster or somebody who sits in a cubicle all day.

Legacy is really about how what we do is as much about the things that we do in our lifetime as it is about the things that we leave behind us. In the book, I offer some stories of hope, and also some stories that I think are sort of warning. Ernest Hemingway, a lot of people believe he suffered from bipolar and that there was a history of depression in his family, but he basically died at his own hands thinking that he was never going to create the things that he wanted to create. The sad thing is that his work basically died with him. His family continued a lot of the stuff that he did, but I think of Einstein, too. He died on his death bed trying to finish this Theory of Everything, that he called it. He never completed it, and he didn't have anyone to continue his work, and so people today still speculate exactly what it meant or means.

You contrast that with other people, like my friend Ed, whom I met years ago when I first moved to Nashville, and he's now in his eighties probably, and I talked to him on the phone recently. He told me that the thing that he was most proud of was the years that he spent volunteering after his career was over as a physical therapist and he could just retire and go play golf or whatever, he kind of started this second career of working at a homeless mission in downtown Nashville, and through the years, he saw hundreds of men go through this rehabilitation program, graduate, and all those men, to this day, call Ed Dad. Ed has this beautiful legacy of men's lives whom he has impacted because he's invested in them.

I think that at a certain point we have to grapple with our own mortality, that the thing that you were called to do is never going to be completely finished, that you are going to die with some of the work that you wanted to do still left in you. That's not something to avoid or try to hustle to overcome. It's really something to be aware of so that we can be sharing the work that we do, and so our calling is not complete until we begin to share it with others. Jackie Robinson has a quote where he says that a life is not significant unless it's basically spent on behalf of other people, and that's the idea of a legacy. You are ultimately called to help other people go find their callings, their vocations, their life's work, and until you start sharing the work that you're doing with other people, whether that's in terms of building a team or reaching out and becoming that mentor to somebody else, then you haven't really fulfilled the work that you were born to do.

Andy Traub: Jeff, thank you for those. I hope you who are listening will first consider putting these things into action in your own life, take stock and inventory of where you are, and then be at peace with that and understand that you're part of a process, so that's for you personally. For the benefit of Jeff, and I don't mind saying this, I hope you'll purchase the book. I hope you'll get to ArtOfWorkBook.com and go there, find out more about the book, and share it with others if you've already got one for yourself, because this is an empowering and clarifying message that we are all frankly a part of it. It will apply to whoever has come to your mind.

Jeff, thank you for breaking it down for us. Thank you for going through the hard work of creating something that is not easy, but it's understandable, so thank you for doing that work.

Jeff Goins: Yes. Thank you. It's a pleasure.

Andy Traub: Where are you on your journey? Where are you in your journey of finding the Art of Work? We'd love to know, so find this episode on GoinsWriter.com and find others that are in the same place that you are. If what we talked about today was helpful, then I encourage you to go get Jeff's book, "The Art of Work." Visit ArtOfWorkBook.com to learn more. You're on a journey, and it might just be the map you need to get to your final destination. I'm Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us. Now, go build your portfolio.

Jeff Goins: The clarity comes with action. You have to listen to your life, look back at the things you have learned, see the things that are familiar and consistent resonate with your passion as well as the needs of the world and your own skill set, and then figure out how you can turn around and apply that to the journey ahead of you.