

You're Not Burnt Out. You're Existentially Starving.

👤 [Neil Thanedar](#) ⌚ [December 21, 2025](#) 📁 [Essays](#)
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“Those who have a ‘Why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘How’.”

— Viktor Frankl quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, *Man's Search for Meaning*

Let me guess:

1. Your life is going pretty darn well by any objective metric.
 - Nice place to live. More than enough stuff. Family and friends who love you.
2. But you're tired, burnt out, and more.
 - It feels like you're stuck in the ordinary when all you want to do is chase greatness.

Viktor Frankl calls this feeling the “existential vacuum” in his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was a psychologist who survived the Holocaust, and in this book he explains that the inmates who survived with him found and focused on a higher purpose in life, like caring for other inmates and promising to stay alive to reconnect with loved ones outside the camps. But these survivors also struggled in their new lives after the war, desperately searching for meaning when every decision was no longer life or death.

Frankl realized that this existential anxiety is not a nuisance to eliminate, but actually an important signal pointing us towards our need for meaning. Similarly, while Friedrich

Nietzsche would argue that life inherently lacks meaning, he'd also implore us to zoom out and find our highest purpose now:

“This is the most effective way: to let the youthful soul look back on life with the question, ‘What have you up to now truly loved, what has drawn your soul upward, mastered it and blessed it too?’... for your true being lies not deeply hidden within you, but an infinite height above you, or at least above that which you commonly take to be yourself.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche, Untimely Meditations, 1874

Nihilists get both Nietzsche and YOLO wrong. Neither mean that you give up. Instead, both mean that your efforts are everything.

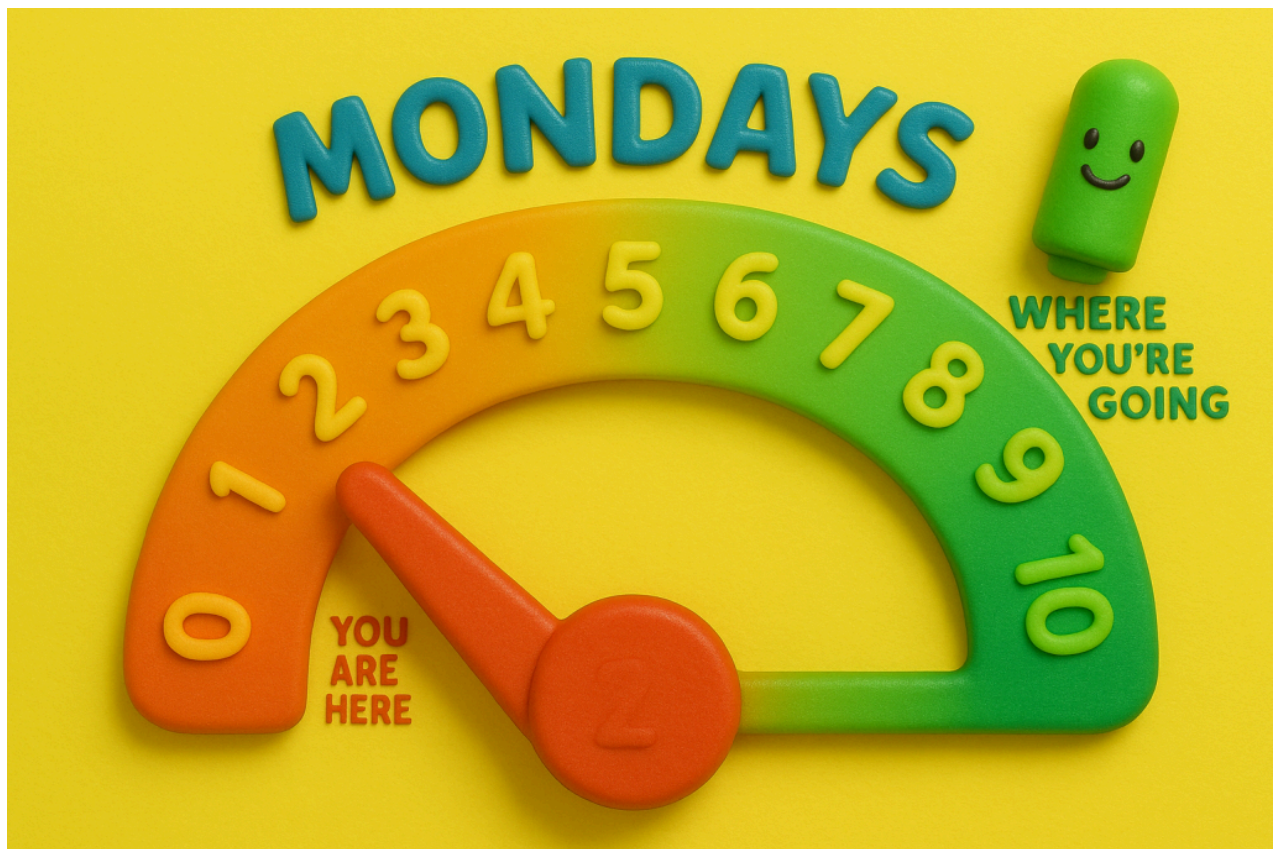
So when you get those Sunday Scaries, the existential anxiety that *your* time is ending and the rest of your life is spent working for someone else, the answer isn't escapism.

Instead, visualize your ideal self, the truest childhood dream of who you wanted to be when you grew up. What would that person be doing now? Go do that thing!

When facing the existential vacuum, there's only one way out — up, towards your highest purpose.

On a 0-10 scale, how happy did you feel when you started working this Monday?

Why wasn't your answer a 10?



You got the great job. You built the startup. You took the vacations. But that's not what you really needed. You kept coming back Monday after Monday realizing you were doing the same job again.

So you tried to improve yourself. You optimized your morning routine. You perfected your productivity system. You bought a sleep mask and mouth tape. Yet you're still dragging yourself out of bed each Monday morning tired and unmotivated.

We're optimizing for less suffering instead of more meaning. We've confused comfort with fulfillment. And we're getting really, really good at it. Millennials are the first generation in history to expect our jobs to provide a higher meaning beyond survival. That's a good thing. It means that the essentials of life are nearly universally available now.

But, as I write in my book Positive Politics:

"The last two hundred years of progress pulled most of the world's population over the poverty line. The next hundred years is about lifting everyone above the abundance line... Positive Politics seeks to democratize this abundance."

Those of us who have already achieved abundance in our own lives now have two responsibilities:

1. Spread that abundance to as many other people as possible.
2. Find something more meaningful to do than chase more stuff.

“The existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth century”

— Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

When I was a kid, I knew exactly what I wanted to do — the most important job in the world. And I wasn’t afraid to tell you either. At five years old, I would talk your ear off about training to be goalie for the St. Louis Blues. By seven, it was astronaut for NASA. By eleven, it was President of the United States. Then middle school hit, I got made fun of more than a few times, and that voice went silent.

After three startups, three nonprofits, and especially three kids knocked the imposter syndrome out of me, I spent a lot of time training my inner voice to get loud again. And what I heard reinforced what I knew all along — that my highest purpose is way above where I commonly take myself now.

Imposter syndrome can be a good thing. That external voice saying “this is not you” may actually be telling you the truth. I got into the testing lab industry to save our family business. Fifteen years and three startups later, I had become “the lab expert” to the world. But I cringed at that label. First, there was no room to grow. I had already done it. I didn’t want to be eighty and still running labs. Second, and most importantly, I knew that my skills could be used for much more than money.

I’d love to say I transformed overnight, but really it took 5+ years from 2020 to 2025 for me to fully embody my new identity. You can see it in my writing, which became much more ambitious in 2020, when I relaunched this site and started **blogging** consistently. That led to my **World’s Biggest Problems** project, which convinced me that **Positive Politics** is the #1 solution we need now!

There are two key components to my highest mission now:

1. Help people find their highest purpose.
2. Be a model for the pursuit of greatness.

That means consistently chasing my highest purpose — helping ambitious optimists get into politics! After nearly a decade of doing this behind the scenes as a political volunteer and advisor, 2025 was the first year where I went full-time in politics. Leading MCFN and publishing *Positive Politics* at the same time was a ton of work. But **nothing energizes me more than fighting two of the biggest battles in the world now — anticorruption and Positive Politics!**

I love politics because it's full of meta solutions — solutions that create more solutions. My Positive Politics Accelerator is a classic example — recruiting and training more ambitious optimists into politics will lead to them making positive political change at all levels of government. But I've also tackled challenges like independent testing with startups and led a nonprofit to drive investigative journalism.

There are so many paths to positive impact, including politics, startups, nonprofits, medicine, law, education, science, engineering, journalism, art, faith, parenting, mentorship, and more! **Choose the path that both best fits you now and is pointed towards your long-term highest purpose.**

I woke up today so excited to get to work thinking it was Monday morning already. Instead of jumping right into it, I spent all morning making breakfast and playing with my kids, then wrote this post. When I'm writing about something personal, 1,000+ words can easily flow for me in an afternoon. This part will be done just in time to go to a nerf battle birthday party with my boys and their friends.

Both the hustle and anti-hustle cultures get it wrong. Working long hours isn't inherently good or bad. If I really had to count how much I'm "on" vs. doing whatever I want, it's easily 100+ hours per week. But that includes everything from investigative journalism and operations work for MCFN, social media and speaking events for *Positive Politics*, reading and writing for my site, and 40+ hours every week with my kids. **Build your whole life around what gives you the most great meaning and purpose, not just your free hours.**

What is your true highest potential? Whether your biggest solution is in startups, politics, nonprofits, science, crypto, or some new technology that's yet to be invented, I'm happy to point you where I think you'll be most powerful. Unlocking other people's highest potential is how I truly reach my highest potential too. We should be flexible on how we solve problems but firm in our resolve to consistently organize people and launch solutions. This is how we solve the **world's biggest problems!**

As Steve Jobs said, “Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact, and that is **everything around you that you call ‘life’ was made up by people that were no smarter than you... You can change it, you can mold it...** the most important thing...is to shake off this erroneous notion that life is there and you’re just going to live in it, versus embrace it, change it, improve it, make your mark upon it... **Once you learn that, you’ll never be the same again.**”

Remember how it felt as a young child to openly tell the world about your dream job?

Find the work that makes you feel this way and jump on whatever rung of that career ladder you can start now. The pay may be a little lower, but the existential payoff will be exponentially higher for the rest of your life.

You don’t have to go all-in right away! In fact, after a long diet of low existential work, it’s probably best to ease into public work. You can even volunteer one hour or less per week for a political campaign or nonprofit to get started. Pick the smallest first step, and do it. Not in January, now. Do it before the end of the year. And see how different you feel when 2026 starts!

And you don’t have to choose politics like me! Do you have the next great ambitious optimistic science fiction novel in your head? That book could spark movies and movements that positively change millions of lives! Choose the path will inspire and energize you for decades!

What matters most is you go straight towards your highest potential right now. Pause once a month to make sure you’re still on the right track. Stop once a year to triple-check you’re on the right track. But never get off this path towards your highest potential. Anything else will starve you existentially.

When you truly chase your highest potential, everything you thought was burnout will melt away. Because you weren’t suffering from too much work, you were suffering from too little truly important work. Like a boy who thought he was full until dessert arrives, you’ll suddenly find your hunger return!

If you’re sick of politics as usual and ready to change the system, join Positive Politics!

*Out of the 100+ posts I’ve written here, “**YC for Politics**” is by far the one that people wish was real. I’m going all-in on this idea now with Positive Politics! I published the*

book on November 11, 2025 and now I'm preparing to launch our first accelerator batch in Summer 2026. Join us!

- **Buy the book:** positivepoliticsbook.com
- **Join the accelerator:** positivepolitics.org/apply

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Neil Thanedar is an entrepreneur, investor, scientist, activist, and author. He is currently Executive Director of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, a nonprofit fighting dark money in politics. He is also the author of Positive Politics, a proven playbook on how to get into politics and do good. Since 2012, Neil has been founder & chairman of Labdoor (YC W15), the independent worldwide alternative to the FDA. He is also an angel investor with his fund Utopic, backing pre-seed biotech startups led by scientist CEOs. He was previously co-founder and president of Avomeen, a product development and testing lab acquired for \$30M+ in 2016. He has also served as Executive Director of The Detroit Partnership and Senior Advisor to his father Shri Thanedar in his campaigns for Governor, State House, and US Congress in Michigan. Neil earned his BS (Cellular & Molecular

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