



Book Your Signature Path

Gaining New Perspectives on Life and Work

Geoffrey M. Bellman
Berrett-Koehler, 1996

Recommendation

Surprise! This self-help book offers plenty you haven’t already seen a thousand times. Geoffrey Bellman’s useful, well-written guide will set a few light bulbs popping in your head regarding your personal and professional paths. He includes thinking exercises designed to widen your perspective on everything from why the world isn’t behaving the way you thought it would, to your passion (or lack thereof) for your work. *BooksInShort* suggests this book to those interested in expanding their perceptions about their personal and professional lives. You walk a path whether you are conscious about it or not, so why not be conscious?

Take-Aways

- Every person creates a unique, signature path.
- You can evaluate who you are, what you’re doing and where your path leads.
- You can conduct this evaluation by assessing your attributes and understanding your roles as you interact with organizations and communities.
- Using purpose and clarity, you have the power to define your own path.
- You can alter your path by seeing yourself and your path in a new light.
- Honestly examine your passion (or lack thereof) for your work.
- The three elements of your signature path are your self, your world and your path.
- Sight building is the best way to learn: seeing your world in new ways and behaving with this new perception in mind.
- Doing things differently can give you new perspective and make your results more productive.
- Know your intentions; they affect the outcome of everything you do.

Summary

Creating Your Signature Path

Just by living, every person creates a path. Everything you touch and do leaves an impression as unique and individualized as a signature. Your signature path is the mark you make. You can evaluate who you are, what you are doing, and where you want your path to lead by assessing your attributes, by understanding your roles in the organizations and communities with which you interact and by acting with purpose and clarity. You have the power to define your own path. Using practical exercises, you can:

- See yourself and your path in a new light.
- Understand why you do what you do.
- Shape the many roles you play in the world and find the deeper meaning in your roles.
- Honestly examine your passion (or lack of passion) for your work.
- Reach for work goals that are life fulfilling.

“All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble.” [Carl Jung]

Those who will find these exercises useful include people who:

- Live and work, and find the two areas inseparable.
- Are caught up in the whirl of life and work.
- Find it difficult to balance their lives.
- Are intent on learning more of what life is about.
- Want to know that they are not alone in these pursuits.
- Want the stimulation of other people’s ideas.

“Reality’s insuppressible complexity counters our quest for simplicity.”

Sir Walter Scott said, "The world is a dream within a dream; as we grow older, each step is an awakening." Each step on your path takes you through your purpose. Your signature path has three essential elements: your self, your world and your path.

Your Self

Your self includes your body, mind and heart. Through these you absorb the world and make some sense out of it. Your body is your public self and your mind is your private self. Your heart represents your reflective self, which works in the background, processing, intuiting, learning and creating sense from your experiences. This self relates each moment to the next, and to the past and future. This is your aspiring self, where you choose and make paths.

“The search for good work means much more than finding a job. Good work engages you, helps you, rewards you, and contributes to others.”

Providing people with new knowledge and skills isn’t the only way to get people to learn. It isn’t even the primary way people learn, and it certainly isn’t the best way to learn most of the time, especially for adults. Even better than knowledge and skill building is sight building - seeing the world in new ways and behaving with your new perceptions in mind.

“Much of the first quarter of our lives is given to others’ building of knowledge and skills in us.”

When you see the world differently, you will honor this new perspective. Your actions will be changed by what you see, leading you to use your old skills in new ways.

The experience you accumulate about getting through life is accompanied by your reliance on the abilities that you think enable you to get through. You say, "I tried it, it worked, I’ll try it again." But that line of thinking only entrenches your familiar routines. Simply repeating what has worked makes doing something new more difficult. Following a routine blocks your responsiveness to new perspectives and new learning. All of your life-altering experiences have one thing in common: They affect the way you see the world. What you place in the foreground is different than it was. And new perspectives lead to new and different actions. Many exercises can help you position yourself to be open to new experiences and, therefore, new perspectives:

- Spend an afternoon with a child and try to see the world from the child's view. Then, explain the difference between your view and the child's to someone else.
- Explain an old problem in a new way. For example, describe the advantages of having the problem, rather than its disadvantages.
- Bring together people who are invested in an issue, especially people you don't usually work with. Ask them questions, listen and note their answers. What did you learn?

“Step back from your path and you can see the paths of people around you, each one as unique as yours in its direction and movement.”

One primary way people seek purpose and fulfillment is through work. You give most of your waking hours and life energy to your work. But how many times have you sought a higher purpose in your work, a purpose beyond making money and meeting everyone else's needs?

Does your work fulfill you? If it doesn't, why not make changes? What are you invested in, what do you willingly return to on a regular basis, especially in your work? Why do you do the things that you do? How do you do your work? What is important to you, and why? The answers can help you avoid slipping into patterns that become ruts. Answers to your "why" questions can help you determine your life purpose, but that's not the same as having destinations. You must find out where the "whys" lead. If you list what you want to do and where you want your life to lead, you are more likely to take action.

Your World

Your world is the external world you encounter through all of your senses. You move through this world, adapt to it and, in many ways, it also adapts to you. Your world consists of everything outside of you - everything that can be appreciated, moved, acquired, consumed, destroyed, valued, loved or hated.

“Each moment of our lives, we are choosing what we want and don't want, will and won't do, like and don't like. Daily activity would slow to a crawl if we consciously examined the hows and whys behind each choice we make. The signature path is about choosing readily and intuitively.”

As you grapple with the world, you often struggle with what it offers you. At home, work, play and rest, reality intervenes and disrupts the life you imagined you would lead. The world often insists that you take action that is very different from what you expected, planned or believed you deserve. You often find yourself reacting when you'd hoped to be in charge. All of this leads people to conclude that the world is beyond their understanding and control.

“Many of us are not conscious that we are building mental structures about how the world really works, but we are doing it nevertheless.”

When life experiences come along that don't fit your understanding of how the world and life work, you have a choice. On the path people take most often, they attempt to force new experiences to fit into their present understanding of how the world works. The other choice (which usually works much better) is to quit forcing and to learn from your most recent experience, which may not seem to fit at the moment. Since this second choice is more complex, people are less likely to consider it. Letting go of your old life model without knowing how you're going to replace it is a brave step. It's even harder to do when you are surrounded by people who want you to do things their way. Remind yourself that what you have recently experienced is real, whether or not it fits with your explanations about life.

No Simple Paths

Each day is filled with choices that are based on how people see the world. People often turn to the guidance of others to learn more quickly than their own limited experience permits. You may be drawn toward simpler explanations as you try to make sense of the world. People like uncomplicated guidance that says: "Do this," "Don't do that," "Take these five easy steps," "Remember this," "The formula is..." Then people can say they understand and know what to do. Of course, none of this works very often. No one's life path is already chosen and paved. You have to choose and clear the path for yourself, despite the insistent voices that offer to sell you easier ways. Too many variables exist for these so-called easy formulas to work. No guarantee promises that if you always do "X"

you will always have "Y" as your result. People like simple, useful structures they can use to understand the world, but they risk misusing these structures. To evolve your own structures, remember:

- Expect complexity - Expect the world to be confusing and ever changing. That's the reality; attempt to understand it.
- Seek simplicity - Find the world's meaning in relation to who you are so far. Know that the ways you understand the world are temporary and useful, and will continue to change.
- Look behind the headline - Find out the story behind it.
- Clarify what you believe so far - Sort what you know from what you believe. Sort fact from opinion. Sort what you say from what you do, what you think from what you feel. Giving some time to understanding yourself will help other people understand you.
- Express yourself emotionally - Say, "At this time, I'm inclined to think..." or "I know I still have a lot to learn about this, but right now I think..." or "Though my thoughts on this might change..." Let yourself and others know the conditions of your statements.
- Be careful when you think that you finally understand, or when you believe that you have the correct way of seeing - Knowing that you are right blocks your need to continue to learn. You risk going from being curious to becoming dogmatic and righteous.

Your Path

Your path is where you touch the world, the difference you make by being here. It is every point at which you make physical contact with the world. In your world and your communities, you play many roles. Explore the paths that emerge from those roles and take you in many directions simultaneously. Your challenge is to bring all of them together, to make them your signature path. Work gets special attention because many people are consumed by work, which leaves them little life outside of work. Your work has its costs and its benefits. It is like a marriage to the world. What kind of marriage is it going to be? How will it be special? Will it be productive? Is it for better or worse, for richer or poorer? Will your marriage to your work have love in it? Your path includes words and thoughts that aren't usually expressed about the workplace: passion, intention, compulsion, fear, love, suffering, trust and appreciation. All of these play a profound role in your relationship to work. Ask yourself:

- When you give yourself to work, what do you get back?
- How does work feed or starve the rest of your life?
- What do the important people in your life tell you about your work? How do they say it affects you and them?
- What are you learning about love, work and your passion?

“Don't become entranced with your way of seeing the world and your need for others to see it that way too. And be cautious around others who see the world through boxes, grids, types, styles and issues.”

The modern world strongly supports overwork. The demands of work leave many people dissatisfied. Too often people rely on work for more than it can possibly give, and they use it to displace (or replace) other essential sources of life satisfaction. Your own signature path includes dealing with the dilemmas that work creates for you. Look at where your present path leads. Does it excite you? Does it bring you joy? What do you want to do about it?

It's Your Choice

Everyone lives in the overlap between what they intend to do and what they choose to do. The outside world seems to ask you or tell you to look at your intentions: "Do you really want that?" "You should want this!" That outside world entices you to adjust to its version of reality, to choose it. This is the world where your public self lives. But, you also have an inside world, a private self, that wrestles with what you know, feel and want, and a reflective self that cares about who you are becoming and what you can do to achieve your purpose. Consider these questions:

- Do I know my intentions? Can I choose?
- What is the difference my choice would make? Is that difference important?
- What is more important, the choosing or the choice?
- What best represents progress, intentional movement or a thoughtful decision?

- Do I know enough about the options to choose between them?

“The world has an order of its own, a 'mind' of its own.”

When I don't know enough about the options, is my actual choice important?

About the Author

Geoffrey Bellman is the author of *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge*, *The Consultant's Calling*, and *The Quest for Staff Leadership*. He was an internal consultant and manager for 14 years with three corporations.
