

an official preview of

Hallelujah!

AN ANTHEM FOR
PURPOSEFUL WORK

by

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Publisher's Note

The authors elected to self-publish this book. At that time, Kevin opened Red Letter Publishing. Kevin oversaw all design and preparation for the print versions, first digital versions, and website. Cathy and Lyle contributed their oversight and help throughout those processes.

This book is therefore 100% author-designed and author-published.

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WHY

Work is a four-letter word, but it doesn't have to be penance.

We'll spend approximately half of our adult lives working. It should be no surprise that our happiness, well-being, and positivity will be largely determined by our engagement and satisfaction with our work. Our life's work is central to how we think about ourselves and how we engage with the world around us.

It's troubling to see so many people frustrated, apathetic, and cynical about their work. A recent Gallup survey of employee engagement indicated that only thirteen percent of employees worldwide are engaged in their work. *Thirteen percent!* Look around at the businesses and offices and places of service. Look around at all of the people working there. Look around and you'll see it for yourselves. When is the last time you experienced a customer service worker who made you feel that you were fortunate to be that person's customer? Most people are not truly fulfilled by what they do; precious few would call their jobs their "life's work."

We live in a time of cynicism. This is a time when *Dilbert*—a comic strip about office politics, corporate bureaucracy, and incompetence—is often cut out and posted in the very offices it parodies, a testament to our collective cynicism about our work. About the only other thing you're likely to find in a typical office break room is one of those generic posters with a picture of a team of mountain climbers, or perhaps fighter jets flying in formation, with a subtitle like TEAMWORK or EXCELLENCE. That poster is probably right next to the information the employer was required by law to post, and whatever the poster says is trite at best and hypocritical at worst.

But there is hope, and there is a better way. Cynicism does not have to be the standard mindset of employees, nor is it the inevitable consequence of employment. Neither *Dilbert* cartoons nor generic platitudes have to be the standard décor. You can choose better things for the walls; maybe you can even break down the walls and create new spaces.

You've heard stories about sports teams, military units, or even single persons confronting and overcoming seemingly impossible challenges. You've got to admire their spirit, the way they can accomplish so much despite their hardships. But what about people who don't have a life-or-death, superlative story to tell? Where are the stories of average people who turn an uninspiring workplace into something with heart and soul? Isn't that a story that more of us want and need to hear?

We present such a story and its transcendent lessons. The choir we describe is real, and belongs to a real church: Christ Church United Methodist in Louisville, Kentucky. (The story, however, is fictional, and all characters described in the book are composite characters, not factual depictions of particular people. The only character written to be consistent with reality is the choir director, whom you will meet shortly.)

This choir is composed of “average” people from all different walks of life—all ages, all professions, all levels of musical talent. Some in the choir cannot read music or even match pitch, but when they all come together they create soul-stirring music, music that lifts the spirits of all who hear it. Why and how these people create such beautiful sounds has much to teach all types of organizations—large or small, for-profit or not-for-profit.

The members of the choir are not a collection of soloists. They sing to express, rather than to impress; they sing to get a message and a meaning out, not to bring attention or glory in for themselves. They come together to fulfill a need: a musical need and a spiritual one, a personal need and a communal one. The choir is there for a reason, and when you hear them sing, you can hear that they believe in that reason. But don't take our word for it. Just listen:

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In *Hallelujah!*, we apply the lessons learned through the choir to a fictional yet typical company, a company whose employees who are cynical laborers and not believers.

The conclusion of each chapter in this book presents a Testament. These Testaments are the summary, purpose-focused truths for their respective chapters. The final section of the book, **CREATE YOUR WHY**, presents additional Principles for applying these Testaments, for making purposeful work a reality in your organization. These Principles constitute the actionable part of the book, the real-world

extension of the themes and subjects at work in each chapter. We anticipate that you will be able to apply them in your own work and in your own life.

Other books have been written about transformational purpose and the workplace. Two particularly good ones are Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and Simon Sinek's *Start With Why*. Their primary themes—finding and following a spiritual purpose and harnessing the power of belief at work, respectively—run through this book, so we say “amen!” to Rick and Simon.

Work is too important a part of life to simply tolerate. If you're anything less than thrilled with your own career or workplace, think about your upcoming transformation; use this book as a guide, as a model for what can be wonderful about work. Your team, customers, and shareholders will be grateful—and the only cynics left will be your competitors.

Let's face the music.

ONE Crisis

“If one wanted to crush and destroy a man entirely, to mete out to him the most terrible punishment, all one would have to do would be to make him do work that was completely and utterly devoid of usefulness and meaning.”

— *Fyodor Dostoevsky*

The first thing Susan noticed was the smell. It was old-fashioned, somewhere between hardware store and craft shop—a bit of chemical, some paint, some wood chips and metal shavings—but faint, cozy even. Looking around, the place was all wood and shades of gray, but clean: a pocket of cubicles in one corner, a series of workbenches and shelves towards the back, a modest gallery of plain glass shelves showcasing trinkets nearer the door.

An old jeweler with a white beard sat at the counter by the entrance, looking down through a magnifying glass at a silver ring, and when Susan walked in, he spoke without looking up.

“Good morning. What can I do for you?”

“Hi there,” Susan said. “I’m looking for summer work, and I’d like to speak to the manager.”

The jeweler carefully put down the ring and magnifying glass and looked up. “Well,” he said, grinning, “You found me on the first shot.” He put up his hands like a bandit surrendering to the sheriff.

“Oh, great!” she said, chuckling. “My name’s Susan,” she said, stepping forward and extending her hand. The old man smiled and shook it.

The jeweler’s name was Douglas Carter, and Doug explained that Memento was a small regional chain. Memento did everything from ring cleanings to custom engraving, but their main business was custom projects.

“People come in with their keepsakes—a kid’s drawing, a pile of photographs, a folded American flag—and they want to preserve it with dignity.

They have some idea or some feeling they want to capture and they come to Memento to make it happen,” Doug explained.

“That’s pretty cool,” Susan said.

“It is,” he said, smiling. “Every project is a little bit different, so you stay focused. Sometimes I’m busier than I like, especially when we have large corporate orders, but overall it’s been enjoyable work for me as I move towards retirement.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Susan said. “This does sound like something I’d enjoy if you needed any help for the summer.”

The old man shrugged. “We don’t really have an application suited for part-time hires. We don’t usually hire part-time is why. But you seem interesting, so tell me about yourself.”

Susan ran through the standard details: twenty-one years old, rising senior in college, studying music with a minor in business. She came from a military family who’d recently moved here, and she was spending the summer with them. She decided to look for work within biking distance, so she’d biked there.

“Is there something in particular you’d be interested in doing?” Doug asked.

Susan thought a moment. “I’m crafty, I like learning about business, and I work well with people. I’m not too picky beyond that.”

Doug nodded. “All right. I’ll think on it. Let me take a look at my numbers this weekend and I’ll see if I could use the help.” He pointed to a table by the door. “Take one of those cards. It has our number on it. Call me Monday afternoon, if you would.”

Susan smiled. “Thanks, Mr. Carter. I’ll talk to you Monday.” She reached out her hand and he shook it again.

“You’re welcome,” he said, picking up his ring and magnifying glass again. She walked out and the door closed behind her.

“Hmm,” he said, raising the glass to his eyes. *The kid’s got something.*



The summer job Doug offered Susan quickly evolved into a high-intensity internship. She was learning how to use machines and tools and software she’d never even heard of. In almost no time she’d bought four pairs of safety glasses and another box of Band-Aids for the little cuts on her hands. The clean apron she was given in May was splattered with nine colors of paint by June.

She was also putting her people skills to work in coordinating with multiple staffers and multiple specialists: designers, artists, sales reps, project managers. She realized that what appeared to be a small store in a shopping center was really a front office for a fairly complex operation.

Sometimes she'd work on a small project alone, but mostly she stuck with Doug and helped with whatever project he was doing. Despite being manager of the store, Doug didn't like to spend much time in the office, and so the office had long since become a sickening mess of paper with a blocky old computer screen buried in one corner. Sometimes Doug would be forced to hunker down between leaning piles of paper to answer long strings of unread e-mails and generate the occasional report for Corporate, and Susan could hear him grumbling from the next room.

Suffice it to say that Doug was more of a hobbyist and a tinkerer than he was a manager. Corporate tolerated his deficiency as a project manager because of the high-quality work the store produced.

When it became clear by graduation that Susan wouldn't have a music-related job by graduation, she called Doug and asked if she could come back full-time. "As an adult this time," she joked.

"Glad you called me," he said. "I had planned to keep a spot open for you and I was going to call and offer it to you." She was a real asset to him, he said.

Relieved simply that she had a job out of college—something with decent pay and a boss she liked—Susan stopped looking for work elsewhere. Over time, she helped Doug more and more with day-to-day management. Right when she was beginning to wonder what actual career was next, Doug fell ill and was forced to pass the mantle of management, and straight to Susan it went. Thus, armed only with her minor in business and a hand-me-down scrapbook of instructions, with no training or certifications and virtually no seniority, Susan had become manager of Memento.

At that time the store's performance was steady—somehow—but the staff was only ever half-present. The record-keeping and workflow were disastrous. Corporate bureaucracy from Memento's central office wasn't helping, and Doug's own office procedures were simplistic at best.

Susan spent about a year just ironing out basic problems, getting paperwork put away and software updated and hard drives cleaned out, and on and on, before she could get to mastering the basic business of managing. She always got by, and she kept the numbers steady, but it was a constant dull ache between her ears.

What had at first seemed like a tremendous honor now seemed like a weight around her neck. *I didn't sign up for this*, she'd thought more than a few times that

year. Her job felt like an exercise in futility and never-ending paperwork, and worse, she felt like an impostor. She had once known the people she was working with—and she'd once tried to care when hiring new people—but eventually everyone was acting the way she felt. *Like the walking dead.*

While successful people seemed to be swinging like Tarzan, effortlessly jumping from one rope to the next in the jungle of life, Susan felt like she was clinging to a knot at the end, waiting for a miracle and meanwhile being stung by the insects. Orders were being shipped late, customer complaints were increasing, the Corporate office was sending “ratchet it up” e-mails on a weekly basis, and staff bickering was becoming a daily ritual. Over time, her most talented employees were leaving for better chances. She was losing sleep. She was facing a crisis and she knew it.

What she'd enjoyed, what had sometimes felt more like fun than work, was now worse than work. *At least some people are well-paid for their suffering*, Susan grumbled to herself. Her love for the business had dried up, but she was stuck there, and every time she wanted to be angry about it, she would think, *no, you wanted to try.*

Her work had made her a cynic. And she could see her staff becoming more cynical. *Memento: you come because you're creative, you stay because you're dying inside.*

At least she had something—someone—to go home to, her husband Jason. They had started dating late in college; he proposed a couple years after. Now newly married, they lived together in a small house a couple miles from the store.

And that is where our story begins. It begins on a Friday late in the summertime, about a year after Susan had taken over as manager of Memento. Jason was at home, waiting for her. It had been a particularly rough day at the office.

“Hey, baby.” He walked over and gave her a little kiss. “How was your day?”

“Not great,” Susan said as she put down her things. “I won't go into it. Let's just say that I'm glad to be home. And thank God it's Friday.”

Jason frowned. “Sorry, Suze.”

She smiled at him. “No, it's all right, sweetheart. Like I said, just glad I'm here with you, and not there anymore.” She stepped to him and returned the kiss.

He smiled back. “Well, I'm glad you're here, too. And now that you're home, we can figure out our evening plans.”

She raised an eyebrow. “We have plans?”

“Well, we might,” he said. “Mark and Jodie are throwing a barbecue—just a little informal backyard thing. They invited us and I figured it might be fun. Want to go?”

Susan thought for a moment. “On a scale from dead to manic, how high an energy level are we talking about?”

Jason thought in return. “Sedate,” he eventually said. “Knowing Mark and the people he mentioned, we’ll just sit there on his deck and drink good beer and eat.”

“That sounds exactly like what I want to do right now,” Susan said. So they went.

Sure enough, a couple hours later, Susan was gently buzzing from two ales and grazing at the vegetable tray. And, true to Jason’s word, she was among lazy, burned-out equals; everyone picked a spot next to a bowl of food and parked there for the evening. Susan’s main counterpart at the carrots and dip was Cheryl.

Cheryl asked what Susan did for a living and what she had studied in school. Susan said she studied music and had sung in choruses different times before.

“Oh, you’re a singer?” Cheryl asked, suddenly excited.

“I moonlight as one, sure,” Susan said.

“Have you ever thought about joining a choir again?”

Susan pursed her lips. “I hadn’t really thought about it. I’m not sure I could make the commitment, but I like the idea of it, sure.”

“Well,” Cheryl said. “I have to tell you about the choir I sing in. Do you know Christ Church?”

Susan closed one eye. “On Brownsboro? Near Rudy Lane?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Everyone’s been really amazing, and Dan—have you met Dan Stokes? The choir director there?”

“I haven’t, no.”

“Well, he’s wonderful,” Cheryl said. “I’ll send you his e-mail address. You ought to meet him. Meet him and you’ll get why everyone there has stuck around.”

“I’m sure he’s wonderful,” Susan said, indifferent. “It sounds like a good gig.”

“Oh, it is. But Susan, you just *have* to come sing with us,” Cheryl insisted. “Singing does you good, you know. Puts your soul right.”

“I know it,” Susan said, chuckling.

The merriment continued until a while past dark, and then Susan hugged Cheryl goodbye. “I’ll send you his e-mail! Dan’s e-mail!” Cheryl called after her as she walked to the car. Susan thanked her and promptly forgot about the whole thing. She and Jason went home and collapsed, falling straight to sleep.

The next day—a Saturday—Susan woke up late and saw the e-mail there, true to Cheryl’s word. She looked at it a minute and thought about it. *Well, what the heck?* she thought. *Worst thing is I go once and decide it’s not for me.*

She scheduled a Tuesday meeting at 5:30 with Dan to meet him and learn about the choir. With the meeting marked on her calendar, Susan promptly forgot about it, just as she had before, and went about her life. She slunk back into her miserable workweek routine, completely unaware of what would change in the months to come.

If you work without a sense of purpose, you join “the walking dead.” Disengagement at work is disengagement for a very large part of life. You, as the leader, dug the grave; you will have to pull yourself and others out.

TWO Commit

“The two most important days in your life are the day you were born and the day you discover why.”

— *Mark Twain*

At 5:15 PM, cold rain started hitting the windshield in sheets. Usually on a Tuesday Susan would have been home already, but she'd been held up at work. Again. This time, it was another cruel jigsaw puzzle of a schedule trying to piece together her motley crew with the staffing requirements—then equipment failures, changing deadlines, and on it went. Eventually she just left the office. *It can wait until tomorrow.*

In the parking lot, as Susan stepped into her car, she wondered what Jason would be making for dinner when she remembered her late appointment with Dan at Christ Church. *Fudge*, Susan thought. *I just want to get home. Could I cancel? I can't cancel now; it's fifteen minutes before the meeting.* She sighed. *All right*, she thought, *just one more, Susan, and then you're done.*

When she arrived at the church, Susan parked near the door and dashed inside through the rain. It took her a few minutes to find Dan's office in the labyrinthine church. Susan was less and less sure what to expect as the marble and fresh paint of the foyer gave way to old carpeting after a few turns. Following the signs, she made one last turn and passed a stair-stepped practice room, then came upon a small office with a balding man seated at a computer, reading.

“Dan?” she asked.

He was on his feet before he turned around. By the time she saw his face it was already smiling wide. “You must be Susan!” he said. “Welcome! Have a seat!”

She shook his hand, a bit thrown by his energy, and mumbled something friendly in return. As she sat she observed the décor: a candelabrum in the shape of a pipe organ, a Donald Duck hat, a collection of stuffed bears, several

old hymn books, and a large sign which read:

I AM SUBJECT TO BURSTS OF ENTHUSIASM

No kidding, she thought.

But, other than his seemingly boundless energy, Dan looked like an unassuming, average person: not remarkably short or tall, neither fat nor thin, but just . . . normal. His attire was plain—pants, black leather shoes, a neutral button-up shirt. In fact, as far as Susan could tell from the outside, the only thing remarkable about Dan was his animation. It seemed to find its way into everything he said and did, an enthusiasm somewhat like when a child has very good news to share.

Dan started the conversation. “So, if you don’t mind my asking, who gets the credit for getting you here?”

“It was Cheryl. She’s a friend of a friend,” Susan explained. “I got talking with her about you at a friend’s gathering.”

“Well, I hope she gave you fair warning,” Dan said, his voice building. “We can get a little crazy in here sometimes!” He laughed.

Susan laughed along. “Not a problem,” she said. “Even the best ones have to.”

“And often,” he added. “Every moment you’re dealing with a motley crew of a hundred plus, you’re dealing in crazy.”

“That many?!” Susan was stunned. She’d pictured a quaint little chorus with serene faces like the angels at a nativity scene. Not “a hundred plus.”

“Yes, that many. I know it doesn’t look like it, but we fit in there.” He pointed through the wall to the next room, a medium-sized practice room with rounded risers.

“For now, anyway,” he added. “Keep bringing people on, like Cheryl brought you, and we might have to take practice elsewhere.”

“Or add a second round of tryouts,” Susan joked.

Dan shook his head. “Nah. We won’t do a second round of tryouts because we never even do a first round. No tryouts, no formal requirements, nothing.”

Susan was again surprised. “Nothing? Not even triage to get people in the right sections?”

“Meh,” Dan said, shrugging. “Most people already have a good idea of what voice part they are. You can always move around if you’re in the wrong spot.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” she said. “And do you train people how to read music? It’s been a long time since I’ve picked up—”

Dan smiled and shook his head. “Not a problem. A lot of people in the choir can’t read music.”

Susan laughed out loud. “That’s really funny,” she said. “A choir that can’t read music. I thought Methodists were known for being a musical bunch,” she joked.

“Well, that’s not *always* true,” Dan said, smiling slyly. “We have our professional musicians and people who are strong enough to do solos on one hand, and on the other hand . . .” He gestured, bringing his hands apart, and as he did, he rolled into a shrug.

“But, of course, what matters is what we’re here to do, and we do it well. We end up sounding great, and we make something transcendent that’s more than the sum of our parts. And so welcoming everyone who wants to sing is what we are about,” Dan said, gesturing to Susan. Susan blushed.

Dan bounced in his chair and pulled one of his legs under him. He was sitting on the edge of his seat, clearly brimming with excitement. “Let me tell you a little about what we do,” he said.

“No, no,” he said, interrupting himself, “even better. Let me tell you a little about *why* we do what we do.”

“We all love beautiful music,” he said. “But we’re here to communicate a message *about* something beautiful. . .”

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