

what the heck
am I going to
do with my
life?

MARGARET FEINBERG



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What the Heck Am I Going to Do with My Life?

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To every person who has ever desired to live outside the box and had the guts to do it. I stand in awe of your courage, creativity, and raw talent. You are my heroes.

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Spark: Introductions

What the heck am I going to do with my life? It is a question that just won't go away. You probably remember being asked as a child, *What do you want to do when you grow up?* You may have listed one of the more popular answers: a schoolteacher, doctor, lawyer, or fireman. Maybe you dreamed big and wanted to be an astronaut or win a Miss America Pageant. Or maybe you were a little different from the other kids and wanted to be a body-builder, design roller coasters, or serve as an international diplomat to a third-world country. I was one of those "special" kids.

When you finally secured a diploma—whether from high school or college—people rephrased the same basic question: *What are you going to do after graduation?* Unless you wanted to be caught like a deer in the headlights over and over again, you needed an answer, an internship, a part-time job—anything to make the question go away.

Maybe you just graduated with a degree in business only to discover that you hate business. You like the idea of being a teacher except for the students, or you love public service except for the people. The reality hits that you've spent the last few years pursuing a career, and now you wonder if there's something else you should be or want to be doing. You stare down the long road to retirement and quietly wonder, *Now what?* You can't help but think that you really should have all this figured out by now. You keep asking yourself the familiar question, *What the heck am I going to do with my life?*

You are not alone.

It is a question we all ask ourselves from time to time, usually more often than we want to admit. Even when the question disappears for a while, it usually makes a reappearance in a different stage of life. Just when you think you have the answer, something happens, circumstances change, and you are left wondering, *What the heck am I going to do now?*

As a child, Darlene wanted to be a waitress like her mother. Darlene began working at Denny's at the age of fourteen and dreamed about being a veterinarian one day. But by the time she enrolled in Adams State College, she had no idea what she wanted to do. For the first two years she explored her options. She studied music because she liked to sing, then shifted to music education because she liked kids, too. When she discovered she didn't want to teach music theory, she switched to an elementary education major, but a semester into the classes she changed to psychology. Then she took a Spanish class and got hooked on learning a foreign language. She plans to graduate with two majors: psychology and Spanish.

Now twenty-two, Darlene concludes, "I have absolutely no idea what I want to do with my life. I am at that funny transition period now where I should be making decisions and choices. The doors of possibilities are all open and I am overwhelmed. All I know is that I will be happy to return home and start working at Denny's again until I figure out the next step."

Everyone has Denny's Moments—the desire to return to a place that's safe and comfortable and will allow us to figure out who we are and what we're going to do. My own Denny's

NEED A DENNY'S MOMENT?

Thinking of taking some time off to discover your passion or just find yourself?

If so, here are a few ideas:

Seasonal Work. Whether you work in a ski lodge or as a lifeguard, most towns with a tourist industry desperately need seasonal workers. Can you drive a van, clean a room, or check in a hotel guest? The jobs may not be glamorous, but they'll buy you time to relax and reflect.

Temp Agency. Sure, you might get offered some pretty odd jobs—one guy I know was hired to sit by the highway and record the number of cars that went by—but the great thing with a temp agency is that you can always say no if the job doesn't suit your fancy (or you don't own a suit). With temp jobs, you can agree to your own hours and expose yourself to new professions and work environments along the way.

Move Back In with Mom and Dad. Probably one of the least popular options, but it's becoming more common than you can imagine. In fact, 60 percent of college grads now estimate that they'll be heading back home after diploma day. So if your old room is still available and the 'rents are willing to taking you back, enjoy the opportunity for downtime.

Caretaking. These gigs can be hard to get, but there's nothing like living rent free and even getting paid for a little maintenance. Let people know you're interested in caretaking. Put an ad in the paper. Advertise online. You never know when the owner of a phat pad just might need you.

Moments have taken many forms—ski instructor, nanny, caterer, housekeeper, and all kinds of part-time jobs that bought me enough time to figure out what was next. Maybe you are in a Denny’s Moment right now, or maybe you know deep down inside that it is time to take a step back from your current job and exhale.

Wherever you are in life, this book is designed as a reminder that everyone wrestles with questions of calling, vocation, risk, and courage in one form or another. *Can I really do it? Is it worth it? Where do I begin?* These are the questions that make us human, and they’re more relevant today than ever.

Whether you realize it or not, a dramatic change has occurred in the workplace over the last twenty to thirty years. For previous generations, a job was just that—a job. You put in your hours and earned your pay. A good job was a good-paying job. But as the pace of life and length of the workweek have continued to increase, more and more people look to their workplaces to provide more than just a paycheck. Today’s dream job provides meaning, purpose, and authentic community. It fosters personal growth, develops individual talents, and allows you to make our planet a little better at the end of the day. And, oh yeah, it allows you to pay back all those student loans (ahead of schedule) and afford a few urban sprees or at least a really nice vacation on a tropical beach with friends. In other words, a job title twenty years ago was a reflection of what you did. A job title today is a reflection of who you are.

That’s why, in the following pages, you’ll be challenged to

answer tough questions about what motivates you, what stops you from taking bigger risks, and how you can do a better job of balancing your life, career, and faith. You'll be asked questions not just about what you do, but about who you are and who you're called to be.

The quizzes, tests, and spaces to journal and even draw add an interactive element that will challenge you to reflect on your unique personality, talents, and rhythms.¹ The chapters are filled with the journeys of everyday people, like you and me, who have asked the same pivotal question and struggled to find an answer. To gather these stories, I took a few risks of my own by calling, e-mailing, and interviewing more than a handful of individuals, including personal heroes. The topics explored in the chapters—direction, calling, passion, reality, and impact, among others—stand alone as their own entities. They raise questions, explore principles, and uncover truths.

While this book will serve as a helpful guide for your personal journey, you won't be able to open to page 73 and discover that you really were meant to be a police officer or flip to page 94 and realize that it is time to call it quits on that dream of being a rock star. You won't find five easy steps, six quick methods, or seven fast rules in the pages that follow. That would be too easy. Rather, *What the Heck Am I Going to Do with My Life?* is designed to take you on a journey of discovery. By the time you finish this book, you still may not have a fill-in-the-blanks response to *What the heck am I going to do with my life?* but maybe—just maybe—you'll be one step closer to discovering the answer for yourself.

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Resolve Career Distress

Feeling a little distressed rather than de-stressed when it comes to your career? If so, you're not alone. How do you overcome all the obstacles to resolving career distress? Barbara Moses, PhD, author of *What Next? The Complete Guide to Taking Control of Your Working Life*, advises

Focus on the real issues. Don't use global language like "I hate this job." Be specific about what you don't like. Sometimes just articulating a specific issue brings insight for a solution that may actually be a minor adjustment rather than a cataclysmic change.

Acknowledge that you have a problem. It doesn't make you weaker. Indeed, it takes a strong and optimistic person to say, "I am unhappy. I deserve more. I am prepared to identify what I need to do to be happier."

Don't expect a magic-button solution. Be prepared to live with uncertainty and confusion while you dig through the issues and possibilities. It takes time to envision what's next.

Make a plan. It can take a couple of years if you need to get your finances in order, upgrade your education, or develop a network of contacts in a future field.

Identify what's holding you back. Is it fear of failure? a lack of clear vision? loyalty to others? insufficient confidence in yourself? Whatever it is, face up to it! Write it down or say it out loud. Think about whether your fears and anxieties are realistic. Everyone has these fears. They don't make you foolish.

Give yourself permission to dream. Often people feel silly or self-indulgent when they fantasize about a dream job. But it can actually provide important clues about what you feel you're missing and what you need to feel good about your work, whether at the same job or in moving on.

Don't overestimate the consequences of change. You may fear that your world is going to be turned upside down, but once you develop a plan, you will realize or find ways to ensure that a move will have only a modest impact—and improve your happiness factor.

Get support. One of the most significant contributors to successful transitions is having a group of people you can go to for cheer-leading. Friends and family can provide important emotional support, but they are not experts on work and cannot see you objectively. In addition, complex psychological issues often underlie career distress. Consult a career counselor who can act as a neutral sounding board and provide structure to help you identify the problem, overcome inertia, work through critical decisions, and develop a realistic course of action. Check the Association of Career Professionals International (www.acpinternational.org) for a listing of consultants by location.*

**Adapted from What Next? The Complete Guide to Taking Control of Your Working Life by Barbara Moses, PhD (New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2003). Used with permission. For more information on Barbara Moses and BBM Human Resource Consultants, Inc., visit www.bmoses.com/.*

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Launch:

Where Do We Go from Here?

Forget what's available out there. Go after the job that you really want the most.

David Maister

More adults than I care to remember have asked me about my future plans. Maybe they saw it as an easy way to involve a child in a conversation. Maybe they did it for sport. Maybe they were looking for suggestions for themselves. Whatever the cause, it seemed like I was never too young to know what I wanted to do when I grew up.

By the time I was four, I had decided that I wanted to be Wonder Woman. My mom invested in a hearty pair of Underoos, and I was convinced that I would be a perfect superhero. The real Wonder Woman had to retire someday. Alone in my room, I practiced warding off invisible villains and intruders with my imaginary bulletproof gold bracelets and belt of truth. I kept asking my mom to buy the kids' version of the belt and bracelets, but I must have lost interest or grown out of my Underoos by Christmas because the accessories never arrived.

After battling the forces of darkness, I decided to make a career change. By the age of five, I knew what I really wanted to be when I grew up: a doctor. I had the plastic Fisher-Price Medical Kit to prove it. I learned to use a stethoscope, thermometer, and blood pressure gauge. I made my friends say ahh and

checked their temperatures before they were allowed to come over to play.

Medicine seemed destined to be my future until the summer that I spent every waking moment watching the Olympic Games. At the end of two weeks, I knew my calling: I was meant to be a gymnast. I tumbled all over the living room floor and my bed. I ran into tables and walls and over the dog at least three times. A handful of concussions later, I began rethinking my blurry future.

Fortunately, the winter games were only a few months away. I calculated the sport that would give me the best chance at winning a gold medal. After two weeks of Olympic glory, I knew I was created for the biathlon, a combination of cross-country skiing and rifle shooting. The reasoning was truly elementary: If I wasn't a fast skier, I could make up for it by shooting well, and if I couldn't hit the bull's-eye, I could still outski the other racers. I was confident I could become good at one if not both of the required skills. Besides, it wasn't a particularly popular sport, so I knew the overall odds of qualifying and competing were better.

A few months after the closing ceremonies, I could still taste Olympic gold. My father surprised me with a small Browning .22 rifle for my birthday. I was thrilled and I was determined. I knew I had less than four years to become the youngest member of the Olympic biathlon team. My father set up a series of paper targets on the woodpile. Hour after hour, I shot and reloaded. Day after day, I honed my skills. I knew it was a matter of destiny—until I got tired of practic-

ing on day four. Video games and playing in the woods with friends were more fun. I hung my little .22 rifle—along with my Olympic dreams—on the mantel.

But don't think for a second that I quit dreaming.

As I grew older, I went through countless other vocations. I wanted to study ballet until I discovered what it meant to be on pointe. I wanted to be a pianist until I learned how many hours of practice it required. I wanted to be a musician until I realized I couldn't keep a beat or sing in tune. I wanted to be an astronaut until Mom said no to two very expensive weeks at Space Camp. I wanted to be a lawyer until I learned that sometimes you have to defend the bad guys. I wanted to be a teacher until I discovered what being confined in a room with 18 six-year-olds does to me. I wanted to be a computer programmer until I realized I could never remember the code. And I wanted to be an ambassador to a third-world country until Georgetown University sent me a denied admittance slip.

YOUR CHILDHOOD DREAMS

When you were a child, what did you dream of doing or becoming when you grew up? Make a list of some of your interests below.

Profession/Interest	What attracted you to that profession?
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Did you give up on the dream? Why or why not? How do you feel about your choice now?

My parents were always willing to support my whims. My grandfather repeatedly told my mother when she was young, “You could be the first female president of the United States. Nothing is impossible.” As a result, I grew up with the same mantra and was eager to believe it. In fact, my high school yearbook has dozens of autographs from fellow students that say, “Good luck in the presidential election in 2020.” Whenever I go back and read them, I laugh. The year 2020 isn’t as far away anymore.

I basically grew up trying to answer the question, *What the heck am I going to do with my life?* At the time that I needed the answer the most—during college, when you have to

declare a major—I had no idea what I wanted to do. Fortunately, something greater than myself was at work. Because of a computer error, I ended up in two religion courses my first semester. I tried to resolve the issue, but by the time I finally reached the level of personnel who could correct the error, the last day to change courses had already passed. I spent a semester taking one rather forgettable religion course and another that changed my life, taught by a man I will never forget.

His name was Dr. Fred Horton. An active Episcopal priest and head of the religion department, Fred Horton surprised me by asking a simple question the first time I stepped into his office: “How are you doing?”

I offered a quick reply and hurried to discuss the course-work matter at hand. In midsentence, he stopped me and asked, “How are you *really* doing?”

I rambled some honest answer about struggling with the transition to college life.

“Well, if you ever want to come back to talk, let me know,” he replied.

Over the next four years I accepted his invitation many times. In fact, I ended up majoring in religion, and Dr. Horton became an incredible source of encouragement and a mentor to me. What I once dubbed a scheduling mistake was used by God to help change the course of my life.

The religion major provided a brief hiatus from the impending question, but as graduation approached, *What the heck are you going to do with your life?* became the topic of choice for nearly everyone that my parents and I encountered. It was exhausting.

SOMEBODY'S GOTTA DO IT

Job (n. 'jāb): A person meeting a need and getting paid to do it.

Believe it or not, people get paid to

- practice quality control for potato chips and candy bars
- design paintball guns
- work as Brad Pitt's assistant
- film segments for the Discovery Channel
- train dolphins
- make surfboards
- design greeting cards
- take photos of exotic locations
- work behind the scenes for cable-news stations
- create computer games
- make music videos
- lead hunting expeditions
- review movies
- design new toys

Unsure of which direction to go, I sent out applications to anywhere that piqued my interest. I applied to Hebrew University in Israel, graduate school, and an internship at a small religious magazine in Florida. All the doors closed except for the internship—which turned out to be with a sister maga-

zine to the one I had applied for—and I spent a summer sweating it out in Orlando. Afterward, I went on a weeklong mission trip that lasted more than a month and then returned for a second stint, where I discovered the hard way that I simply wasn't missions material.¹

I came back to the United States nearly a year after I graduated and faced the doomsday question yet again. I was living at home and working as a ski instructor, kids adventure camp counselor, and nanny. I asked myself a different question: *If I could do anything with my life, assuming that time and money were no object, what would I choose to do?*

The answer came almost instantly. From the deepest part of my being, I wanted to write.

Then I had to face the follow-up question: *What is stopping me from doing it?*

At that moment, the insecurities and fears rose to the surface. What if, like mission work, writing didn't work out? What if I couldn't get published? What if I didn't have the discipline? What if I couldn't feed myself doing it? What if I had to live with Mom and Dad forever?

As I bounced between the emotions related to every concern, I realized that my desire to write was greater than any of my fears or insecurities. I went to the library and researched publishing opportunities. I sent off clips to several Christian magazines and asked if I could write small reviews for the backs of their publications. All but one said yes. Over the next five years, I grew from writing reviews to news stories to feature stories to magazine cover stories. In

2002, Relevant Books published my first book, *God Whispers: Learning to Hear His Voice*.

Today, when people ask what the heck I'm going to do with my life, I have my fallback answer: I am going to write. I'm a writer. That's what I do. Yet even with what most people would consider a career, I can't help but wonder if there's something more. I can't help but revisit the basic questions I have been wrestling with since those days when I could still fit into a pair of Underoos: *What am I going to do with my life? What's next? What's around the corner? What more could I be doing? What could I be doing better now?*

I have asked these questions so many times that I am convinced I should have the answers by now. The problem is that just as soon as I develop an answer, something radically changes in my life or I'm introduced to something new, and I'm forced to revisit the questions again.

I know that I am not alone. I have interviewed more than one hundred people of all ages and backgrounds from around the country, and everyone I've spoken with has wrestled with this question in one form or another.

Even those who have known what they wanted to do since they were knee-high to a grasshopper still admit to struggling and second-guessing along the journey.

Those in their twenties and thirties are particularly vulnerable to soul-searching, but they are joined by people of all ages.

Beth, a twenty-five-year-old, says that when she enrolled

in college, she realized it was time to finally answer the question, What do you want to be when you grow up? The only problem was that she didn't have an answer.

"I think I put a lot of pressure on myself feeling that my job would be my life's purpose, so I wanted it to be something I really had a passion for and would enjoy doing," she says. "I took a lot of different classes my first few years of college trying to figure it all out. I envied my roommate and others who just knew from the time they were small and were on their way to doing it. I, on the other hand, would spend much time wondering and praying about what I would do."

In college, Beth took an Introduction to Social Work class and felt that out of everything she studied, the subject matter was the closest she could come to picking a career once she graduated. "Deep down I think I knew that wasn't the best thing, but it was the best thing at the time," she says.

She graduated with a degree in social work and worked in the field for a few years. "I loved the work and the children I worked with and felt like when I went home and laid my head down at night, I had spent the day doing something worthwhile [for] society and purposeful. But I became burned out from working way too many hours in very stressful situations and realized that I could not continue the pace and demands that social work required for the rest of my life."

Beth began to wonder what else she could do with her life. "There I was again, wondering what in the world I wanted to be and do and a bit frustrated to be in that place again. I began fervently praying and seeking God's direction and knew that

even though I had no idea, he had formed and made me and knew the answers I was searching for. So I prayed and waited.”

In the meantime, she quit her job and moved home with her parents to rest and de-stress for a month. She continued praying and began substitute teaching to pay the bills.

“[God] began to put the field of nursing on my heart,” she recalls. “I looked into it, and I am now completing my first semester of nursing school. I’m starting over, wondering what in the heck I’m doing in nursing school but feeling a remarkable peace.”

Beth says she has come to terms with the fact that life is too complex to figure it all out. “I wish someone had told me when I was in school the first time that it was okay if I didn’t know. At that age it is kind of hard to know what you want to do with the rest of your life. I really had to go out into the world and get some life into me before I really could see and know what all is out there to be and do. I think I put way too much pressure on myself and didn’t enjoy the process of not knowing and discovering what I liked and might be good at doing.”

I can identify all too well with the stress and pressure Beth describes. Figuring out what to do with your life isn’t easy because even after landing a job or finally earning a few years’ work experience to put on the résumé, the questions about what you are going to do don’t always disappear. They just keep resurfacing. Singles, newlyweds, oldlyweds, empty nesters, retirees—anyone at any age or stage in life—can wrestle with these questions and struggle to find answers. No one is immune.

That's one reason I think *What the heck am I going to do with my life?* is one of the greatest questions we will ever ask ourselves. Not just because it is the question that won't go away, but because it forces us to examine ourselves in a new light—who we are today and who we are called to be tomorrow. The question challenges us to look at the core of who we are as individuals, discover our talents and gifts, and come to terms with our weaknesses. When we dare to ask, we step into a realm where anything—including growth, transformation, and change—is possible. Risk, failure, and loss are all potential outcomes, but so are success, innovation, and building a legacy that lives beyond us.

What the heck am I going to do with my life? isn't a safe question, but it has the power to awaken dormant dreams and silent desires. It has the ability to both compel and propel us to fulfill our lifelong calling and purpose. And that makes it a question worth asking.

Looking for Work to Get You through
Till You Know What You Want to Do?

Check out these cool Web sites:

www.coolworks.com

www.groovejob.com

www.hotjobs.com

www.wetfeet.com

www.snagajob.com

www.backdoorjobs.com

Discussion Questions

.0001 **Launch:** Where Do We Go from Here?

1. When you were a child, what did you dream of doing when you grew up? In what ways are those dreams still alive in you today? How have they changed? How have *you* changed?
2. In what ways has your life unfolded as you expected? What has surprised you most about your life? How have you responded to those surprises?
3. Can you relate to the question *What the heck am I going to do with my life?* On a scale of 1 to 10, how much are you currently wrestling with that question? On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you see yourself wrestling with it in the next five years?
4. In what ways does the question of what you're going to do with your life go deeper than just a profession or job?

.0002 **Direction:** What Pushes You?

1. What are your family's expectations about your career? your relationships? your future? How have their expectations affected your choices? Which of their expectations have you met? In which areas have you done something different? What has been the result?

Notes

.0000 Spark: Introductions

1. The tests in this book are not scientifically validated, but they are meant to be valuable resources for self-reflection and assessment.

.0001 Launch: Where Do We Go from Here?

1. People have asked me what I mean by “not missions material.” My time in Honduras was one of those everything-that-could-go-wrong-did experiences. I was ill most of the time and unable to do any of the “missions” work because of a broken vehicle. Halfway through the time, I was robbed at knifepoint and lost everything but my passport and a few dollars. I remember talking to several sets of missionaries who had been in the area for twenty-plus years. When I shared my story, I asked, “Is this normal?” They looked at me as if I were from Mars. They couldn’t relate to my story in the least. At that point, I knew I was not cut out for the mission field. That was a tough realization because I always thought that the people who really loved God served overseas. That’s how it had been portrayed in church while I was growing up. It has taken me years to understand that everyone is created for a different purpose, and no matter the job or country, we’re all called to serve others.

.0002 Direction: What Pushes You?

1. Jerry Slocum interview by the author, December 15, 2004.

2. I opted for a Norwegian.

3. ABC, Inc., *Life of Luxury*, <http://abc.go.com/specials/lifeofluxury.html/>.

4. Thomas J. Stanley, PhD and William D. Danko, PhD, *The Millionaire Next Door* (New York: MFJ Books, 2002).

About the Author

Margaret Feinberg spent the year after college traveling, working multiple part-time jobs, and wondering *What the heck am I going to do with my life?* She finally decided that if she could do anything, she really wanted to write. So she sent query letters off to several magazines. Eight years and some eight hundred magazine articles later, she says she has found her passion and calling.

Margaret has written or contributed to more than twenty books, including *Twentysomething: Surviving and Thriving in the Real World* (W Publishing, 2004), which takes a compelling look at the biggest issues facing today's twenties and is based on more than one hundred interviews with pastors, counselors, and researchers, as well as twentysomethings from across the country. The book helps readers sort through questions including Who am I? What's my purpose? Will anyone ever love me? and Why is no one clapping?

Some of her other titles include *Just Married: What Might Surprise You about the First Few Years of Marriage*, *How to Be a Grown-Up: 247 Lab-Tested Strategies for Conquering Your World* (coauthored with her husband), and *God Whispers: Learning to Hear His Voice*.

Margaret and her husband, Leif, live in Juneau, Alaska, where she loves hiking, kayaking, and chasing the northern lights. During the long dark winters, she's been known to become addicted to reruns of *Law & Order*, *CSI*, and anything related to reality television. She dreams of traveling to Prince

Edward Island (where *Anne of Green Gables* was filmed), eating pancakes with fresh maple syrup in Vermont, searching for hobbits in New Zealand, and exploring China. She loves lazy afternoons filled with great books, warm down comforters, Splenda-sweetened flavored coffee, and mangoes.

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