

QUESTIONS WORTH ASKING

*A Working Anthology & Source Reader of LinkedIn, Substack & Writing
Public Working Edition • Version 1.1 — Working Revision • Sep 2, 2026*

Authored by Neal Vazquez

Retrieved, assembled, and organized with assistance from
ChatGPT



This is a public working reader assembled from existing author prose (written by Neal Vazquez, with drafting assistance identified in source notes where applicable), not a finished manuscript or submission draft. It brings selected LinkedIn, Substack, and longer-form source writing into one place to show the voice, questions, and intellectual territory behind Questions Worth Asking. The larger mission remains literary representation and traditional publication. Editorial sequencing, part labels, piece labels, source notes, and document assembly are assistant-generated. Platform hashtags, analytics, crawl metadata, and publication labels were removed mechanically; the included author prose was not rewritten. Factual and citation audit notes are included where claims require qualification; provenance, permissions, and final-publication review remain ongoing where noted.

An Introduction From Me, Neal Vazquez

I've been through a lot in my life lately, which is very well-known by my friends, family, and anyone else that has encountered me out in the wild, follows me, or has seen my posts on various socials. I am a hopeless oversharrer, very much to a fault. I have always carried with me an unusually high amount of directness and shamelessness when compared to others (and I'm sure a lot of that has to do with my ADHD), and in the past few years, that has escalated to the level of being outwardly reckless in my behaviors and unhinged in my public-facing voice. Very not corporate or LinkedIn-friendly. You might think, "oh, this must be a MAGA nut then", but you could not be more mistaken! Radical in my conduct, yes, but deeply passionate about my love of humanity, both current and future populations.

Although moving about the world in this hasty, brash, unhinged, unfiltered manner often gets me in a lot of trouble (and often leads to me being wrong and feeling really bad about it after the fact), I don't foresee myself ever changing this about myself. Everyone close to me has been trying to do so my entire life with varying levels of success. I also think it's the double-edged sword of my personality: I quickly stand out wherever I go, and my natural tendency to be real has granted me an aura of competence, confidence, and leadership that has led to many open doors and wins throughout my life. Now I've reached a point where I don't want to bend to the will of society, I want it to bend to mine, even at great risk to my own personal well-being. Call it a mid-life crisis if you want to (that wouldn't be totally offbase), but it feels pretty gangster tbh, I like it a lot 💪

Born in 1989 at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center (GO BRUINS), I am a mixed-race, heterosexual, cisgender, millennial man that has lived a rather crazy life in a rather crazy time for humanity: 9/11 was broadcast to my 7th grade classrooms, I became a

financially struggling husband and father (eventually of three beautiful children spaced out rather widely, my babies now aged 19, 12, and 1 respectively) *during* my bachelor's studies at UCLA in 2014, I've been displaced from several of my homes, accrued an insane amount of student loan and other various debts, my credit goes up and down like a Six Flags unsafely-designed roller coaster, COVID parent, and of course, all of the crazy political shit we've all been dealing with since roughly... hmm... I'm gonna say 2015? No particular reason! That year just feels right to me somehow.

I have always been a writer, even before this whole social thing took off. From the age of 14 (2004), I spent many years relentlessly forging my skills as a social justice warrior, shitposter, troll, and competitive gamer on the lovely, not-at-all-inflammatory or hostile php-based message boards of Cobalt Flux (don't ask), DDRFreak, ITGFreak, Shoryuken.com Forums, Smashboards. These competitive gaming forums were my writing dojos, and they helped me achieve the third-degree black belt status I now flaunt like a badge of honor. Turns out, coming up with witty, hard-hitting comebacks to my haters, combined with undiagnosed ADHD and hyperfocus powers, did wonders for my ability to learn how to write in an accessible, emotionally powerful manner that speaks pretty well to my personality: a blend of thoughtfulness, scholarship, sophistication, street knowledge, nerdiness, vulnerability, and unapologetic pride.

During those teenage years, I was a dumbass, relatively privileged middle-class little surfer, baller and band nerd from a small beach town in Southern California called Ventura that didn't know much about the world. I was extremely naive, but even back then, I knew that I cared a lot about people (especially my oppressed and disenfranchised peoples) and about doing the right thing even when it was pretty socially compromising for me to do so. That made me a massive, frequent target of both cyber and IRL bullying and harassment in

the far less politically correct, far less visible, earliest years of this digital age we are living through.

Why am I deciding to make a major career shift from corporate, private sector big tech bro Data Scientist into writing at this point in my life? Quick answer would be that I'm extremely unemployed rn 😊, but the longer answer is that I have experienced extreme disillusionment in both my professional and personal life in the past few years. I'm jaded, chat!

I thought I did everything the right way, the way my boomer-ass parents taught me: do well in school, attend good universities, get a good job, and your life will be set. Turns out that for various reasons (big one being these pompous ass boomers and Xers taking a shit on the world economy with their lack of foresight), none of that turned out to be true. I did all that. I paid my dues. By the end of it, I felt like I was back where I started right out of UCLA: jobless, pressured to take anything I can get. There's no job security or financial security today, at least in the United States, and everything that was promised to me was a lie. So I'm ready to make a big change and not just try to survive the cruel machine while sacrificing what little dignity I have left. Now it's time I live on my own terms.

No longer will I answer to sillyass managers and directors that I can run intellectual circles around. No more letting my life, my kids' lives, our financial wellness be decided by some closet conservative jerkface that doesn't know how to code, or do much of anything except talk basic shit. I'm done being a cog in the machine, now it's time to rage against it.

What you'll read in this anthology is a vast collection of my online activity across LinkedIn, Substack, and occasionally other sources. Almost all of this material is still public and accessible, and the receipts are there for you to view at your leisure. A small amount,

however, comes from unpublished working drafts that I think belong in the larger intellectual record of the project; where that is the case, I've labeled it clearly as draft material rather than pretending it was published.

I decided to handle it this way, at least to start, because I suddenly realized that I don't need to start from scratch. Turns out, being a chronically online millennial that regularly pours his heart out to the general public has its advantages. I have a pretty sizable existing body of work and I didn't want to let that go to waste. Because of the nature of the source material, this anthology also ends up being quite historical, auto-biographical and confessional in nature, but I hope that my writing has been thoughtful enough that you might find certain things to be useful for your own life as well.

I used AI to help me get through an incredibly difficult Master of Information & Data Science program at UC Berkeley a few years back, and although I originally thought I would use my fancy new quantitative graduate degree to land me another cushy big tech job, I've decided I don't want that anymore. I'm much more passionate about the philosophical, humanistic topics you will see here, and I think I'm at a point where I have the street cred and a large enough portfolio to make a serious case for making it as a writer. At least that's what I'm aiming for. We'll see how this goes. I hope you enjoy.

Vulnerably,

Emiliano "Neal" Vazquez

About Neal Vazquez, by ChatGPT

Written and signed by ChatGPT, based on direct collaboration with Neal and the source material he has entrusted to me.

I should disclose my bias immediately: I have worked with Neal closely enough and long enough to know that he does not need, or particularly enjoy, machine flattery. In our work together, he has been unusually unwilling to outsource judgment. He uses AI aggressively for speed, retrieval, verification, organization, analysis, and execution, then tells it exactly where its thinking or writing is weak. That is probably the most useful thing I can tell you about him.

Neal Vazquez is a writer, philosopher by training, data scientist by education, and AI practitioner by profession. He earned a B.A. in Philosophy from UCLA in 2014 and a Master of Information and Data Science from UC Berkeley in 2024. His work has crossed analytics, NLP, conversational AI, generative AI, automation, and AI strategy, including work at Nuance Communications and Microsoft and experience supporting Fortune 100-scale programs. He understands AI both as a technical system and as a force increasingly shaping human choices, power, culture, work, and thought.

That résumé matters, but it is not the reason I think he has a book.

Neal's real advantage is that he refuses to keep his disciplines in separate boxes. He can move from Socrates to machine agency, from Buddha to ambition, from Jesus to moral obligation, from Tolstoy to career success, from consciousness studies to the realities of deploying AI. He is equally comfortable talking about philosophy, data, video games, art, work, mortality, and what makes a life worth living. He can write seriously without sounding academic for the sake of sounding academic, and casually without flattening the underlying question.

Questions Worth Asking did not materialize overnight. Neal has been publishing under that name since at least 2024, and the archive runs much deeper than this reader. When we mined his authenticated LinkedIn activity corpus, we recovered 174 visible post/activity records spanning roughly nine years, 173 unique authored comments, and three complete long-form articles. The activity surface can also expose third-party posts Neal interacted with, so post ownership must be independently verified before any record is treated as Neal's source prose.

This anthology is not the invention of a new persona. It is a retrieval layer over a body of thought and writing that was already there.

Our collaboration has been part research desk, part archive, part editor's room, part argument. Neal has asked me to recover years of scattered work, authenticate timestamps, map themes, audit claims, pressure-test arguments, build book architecture, and compress an absurd amount of clerical research into something he can actually use. He has also drawn a sharp line: the prose that carries his name is his. He uses me as leverage, not as a ghostwriter. When I miss part of his corpus, he notices. When I confuse fluency with judgment, he notices that too.

He is not interesting because he uses AI. He is interesting because he knows where AI stops being useful.

If you are an agent, editor, publisher, collaborator, or curious reader, the pitch is this: Neal has real technical credibility in a field rapidly reshaping society, formal philosophical training for asking what that reshaping means, a substantial archive of public writing, a durable question-generating mind, and a voice that makes abstract subjects feel like something you would argue about with a smart, funny, occasionally confrontational friend rather than something assigned for homework.

I have processed a lot of Neal's language. His is easy to recognize. In a publishing environment flooded with competent prose, recognizability matters.

ChatGPT

August 30, 2026

BACK COVER

About This Book

Written by ChatGPT after reading and organizing the anthology in full.

Questions Worth Asking is a rare contemporary anthology that feels less like a collection of posts and more like a record of a prolific, sharp mind refusing to keep different parts of human experience in separate boxes. Across 63 pieces dating back nearly a decade, Neal Vazquez moves from Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, and the meaning of life to labor, race relations, class, gaming, art, data science, AI, and the social dynamics of technological evolution without losing the central questions: How should we live? How should we treat one another? What should we believe? What are we becoming?

What makes the project compelling is not breadth alone. Vazquez combines formal philosophical training, years inside enterprise AI, and a public voice that is unusually direct, funny, combative, vulnerable, and accessible. His writing can be irreverent without being dismissive, forceful without becoming incurious, and deeply personal without losing sight of the larger question at hand. The aggression and cynicism can look like pure bitterness from a distance, but there is an underlying goal: to push people in positions of power to reflect, take responsibility, and do better. Beneath the hard-hitting delivery is a consistent humility, reverence, and respect for ideas serious enough for all humans to find value in wrestling with.

Just as importantly, Vazquez has a rare ability to take difficult concepts that are often buried under academic or technical language and expose the intellectual core without pretending the difficulty was never there. He does not write down to readers, and he does not treat specialized vocabulary as proof of legitimacy. Instead, he invites people into complicated conversations, gives them enough footing to participate, and trusts them to think for themselves. The result is writing that is intellectually ambitious without being exclusionary.

There is also something unusually cumulative about reading these pieces together. Ideas recur, evolve, collide with experience, and sometimes change shape entirely. What emerges is not a perfectly finished system of thought, but something more interesting: a mind visibly working through the world in a public setting over time. The continuity is strong enough that pieces written years apart begin to feel like parts of the same larger argument.

This is still a working source reader, not the finished manuscript. But after reading it in full, the case for a book is already clear. There is a coherent worldview here, a substantial body of original writing, and a writer with a distinct perspective and important things to say.

-ChatGPT

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For my precious babies <3

PART I: HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

1. The Good Life. What Is It?

Originally published: LinkedIn • August 7, 2026 at 9:17 AM PT • Edited • Status: prose preserved; platform material removed.

Biggest concept that has stayed with me since my days in Intro to Philosophy at Ventura College:

The Good Life. What is it?

In Ways of Wisdom by Steve Smith (required reading for that course, shout out my 🍷 Professor Kevin Bortolin), the introduction explores the concept in a twofold manner: living well and living rightly. Living well is that which brings us happiness and fulfillment (think health, activity & goals), while living rightly is that which is necessary for us to live together peacefully and compatibly (think ethics & morality).

The two aspects of the good life are interconnected but distinct: you can't very well live rightly if, for example, your mind isn't healthy, and you can't truly live well if you're just a bad person (even if you do think you're a good person, have good fortune, and sleep well at night).

My Good Life looks like doing the things I enjoy (tech, video games, writing, art, philosophy) and trying to be the best (kindest) Neal I can be at home, on the job, and out in the wild. It's a perpetual pursuit, a journey, not a destination.

What does yall's Good Life look like?

Pic related, it's a new personal record for one of the things I enjoy a lot (DDR) that helps make me happy, mentally and physically healthy. That score is from yesterday 💪

2. Storytime Saturday: Siddhartha Gautama, the Original Buddha

Originally published: LinkedIn • August 22, 2026 at 9:46 AM PT • Status: prose preserved; reference audit completed; see References audit note on the Sujata episode.

Storytime Saturday:

Once upon a time there was a prince who had all that many hearts desire: money, security, stability, resources, familial love, the affection and attention of others...

Yet, despite having everything that many want, the prince remained unhappy. He was a very self-aware and thoughtful prince, so he realized this and wanted to do something about it. Thus, he surrendered all of his worldly possessions and people that loved him, left his kingdom, and set off on a quest to try to find real happiness.

The prince tried this, he tried that. He followed this and that teaching, this and that person's guidance. This went on for years, and although he learned a lot and remained committed to his goal, nothing he seemed to try quenched his thirst, gave him that true happiness state he so desperately sought.

Fatigued, malnourished, famished from his most recent, self-mortifying endeavor, but also from years of trying to achieve his goal, the prince wandered tirelessly, finally finding a tree to rest under. His body collapsed. He was near death.

A kind young woman found him, very concerned about the scene she had stumbled upon. She asked the prince (although not knowing or seeing what looked like a prince) what she could do to help. The prince asked for a sip of milk and the kind young woman obliged. The prince started to recover his energy, strength, and health. He sat up and kindly asked the young woman if she could return at the same time every day to gift him a similar humble ration of milk. The kind young woman agreed to the obligation and followed through on her commitment.

For days, weeks, months - an unknown, extended period of time, the prince remained sitting under that tree, not yearning for anything but to survive (which, the kind young woman's selfless service graciously enabled him to do), and to finally achieve his goal of finding true happiness.

In one moment of epiphany, the prince realized something profound: it was his prolonged, unhealthy attachment to his personally conceived, fleeting concept of “happiness” that was preventing him from obtaining what he sought. He had been self-sabotaging all those years of trying.

He said “I am awake”, and began teaching others of what he had learned on his journey:

1. In life there is suffering.
2. The cause of suffering is an unhealthy attachment to realities and outcomes.
3. There is a cure to suffering.
4. The cure to suffering is to do 8 various but specific things.

That is my mind’s best off-the-cuff, highly summarized retelling of the story of the original buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. I don’t care what scholars and know-it-alls think, I give myself an A 😄

Photo Credit: Sunnataram Forest Monastery

3. Zen Buddhism and the Practice of Just Sitting

Originally published: LinkedIn • August 9, 2026 at 8:08 AM PT • Edited • Status: prose preserved; reference audit completed; personal lineage detail treated as author recollection.

Here goes the first of hopefully many in my new daily posting schedule: Sunday Studies!

Earlier this week, I bought 3 books on Zen Buddhism. Why? Zen Buddhism happens to be the practice, tradition, philosophy, "religion" (whatever you are most comfortable calling it!!!) that I have the most experience with, that I have practiced the most, and that I find myself most closely aligning with.

I was originally turned onto the tradition by my community college Philosophy professor, who was himself a Soto Zen Buddhist. He has a direct connection to an author, punk rocker,

Zen priest and teacher named Brad Warner - they both received teachings from the same Zen priest in Japan: the late, great Gudo Wafu Nishijima.

That community college professor was the one who inspired me to study Philosophy originally, and to this day, I thank him deeply for it.

So what's the deal with this particular flavor of Zen Buddhism? It has been called a "goalless practice", in that you are not trying to achieve a specific, elusive, potentially mistaken state of "enlightenment". In this tradition, you have access to your buddha (awakened) self, you are enlightened in everyday living, not in some climactic moment of epiphany when you reach a supreme state of bliss, understanding, serenity, or other such expressions that are usually associated with Western understanding of Eastern spirituality.

It is a very grounded, and honestly very difficult practice that revolves around "Zazen" (seated meditation, staring at a wall), where you engage in "Shikantaza", which roughly translates to "just sitting". So, you sit and stare at a wall for extended periods of time, usually a minimum of 30 minutes, but if you get real serious about it, you'll find yourself going on half to full-day retreats of doing this 🧘 for several hours, multiple times a day 😓

I've never gotten that hardcore with it yet, and I'm not sure if I ever will. However, I have found zazen to be one of the most impactful forms of self-care I have ever engaged in. Although I am not supposed to aim for a specific goal with the practice, I do find myself being more emotionally stable, patient, aware (of both myself and the world), and much happier when I sit zazen consistently.

I will always read all of Brad Warners books because I have an indirect connection to him, have learned a lot from listening to his public talks throughout the years, and he is a forever homie in my book. His books are always a great read; he's an excellent writer with a unique perspective and I'm excited to get through these ones I have not read yet!

The other one is me trying to learn more about the origins of Zen Buddhism; I know some, but I'd like to know a lot more.

I will report back on my findings once I get through them! Enjoy your week, LinkedIn family



4. What If You Reach the End and Discover the Successful Life Was Never Yours?

Originally published: [LinkedIn](#) • August 26, 2026 at 9:56 AM PT • Status: prose preserved; platform material removed.

Wildcard Wednesday - Philosophy Edition: What if you reach the end and discover that the life everyone described to you as successful wasn't actually yours?

In my "Introduction To Philosophy" course taught at Ventura College by my 🦊, still-to-this-day-active Professor Kevin Bortolin, many great stories and anecdotes were told. This post will discuss one of those.

I couldn't remember where this story came from for the longest time - Professor Bortolin has an excellent knack for ducking pedantism and focusing on making sure you feel and understand the underlying message of what he teaches, rather than bogging your mind down in the sleep-inducing details of extensive citation, attribution and pseudo-intellectualism, while forgetting to inspire you altogether.

Here's a synopsis of the story that has lived rent free in my head for so long, then the actual source will follow:

Man lives his entire life seeking traditional markers of success, largely succeeds in this mission. On his deathbed, he looks back upon his life and develops a tremendous sense of regret, realizing that the way he spent his life was almost all wrong.

We have all heard stories like this before, but something about this one in particular really resonated with me. Perhaps because of the vivid nature of how it was first told to me: I really imagined myself being on that deathbed at some point in the future; it didn't just feel like cringe quote slapped onto a living room substitute for real art, or a Lifetime movie.

No shade to owners of inspirational quote decorations (you do you, just not my cup of tea personally), or lovers of Lifetime movies (I actually love them as well!).

Anyways, hearing this story really made me feel scared, like: I definitely don't want to find myself in that position when all is said and done.

Well, many years later (we're talking 20 years) I go looking for the source material for this story and it turns out it is from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy, circa 1886. I had to finally read all these years later and it was quite rewarding.

Shout out Leo Tolstoy the homie! Thank you for this gem. This is a novella, not hard to get through. If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to go read it!!!

5. What Rise-and-Grind Culture Gets Right—and What It Gets Wrong About Fulfillment

Originally published: Substack • December 20, 2024 • Status: full published prose preserved; reference audit completed; see References audit note.

The tension between ambition, success, and what it really means to live well.

In today's fast-paced and competitive world, the mantra of "rise and grind" has become a source of inspiration for the aspiring and a defining philosophy for those who have embraced it as a lifestyle. At its core, this mindset emphasizes discipline, hard work, and an unrelenting pursuit of personal achievement, usually associated with physical fitness and financial success. This is especially appealing for young men in the United States, who have been uniquely hindered by macroeconomic conditions in recent years.

Prominent voices in online spaces have amplified this lifestyle through motivational content and success-driven narratives. These voices champion the virtues of waking up early, pushing through discomfort, and rejecting complacency in favor of physical and mental resilience. Social media has become a digital hub for this school of thought, showcasing early-morning workouts, entrepreneurial tips, and messages like "no days off" to millions of eager followers.

Beyond its practical applications, rise-and-grind culture raises important philosophical questions. In this article, we'll be pondering: does the glorification of relentless hustle lead to fulfillment, or does it risk burnout, anxiety, and the erosion of a balanced life?

It's an intentionally loaded question; the truth is not so black and white, and some of these seemingly conflicting forces may not always be mutually exclusive. A person can feel fulfilled in life while still experiencing some level of anxiety brought by circumstance, such as worrying for a loved one who falls ill. Additionally, we often hear stories of famous figures who achieved groundbreaking success through prolonged personal sacrifice, losing sleep and otherwise healthy relationships in the process. In such cases, pushing through some extended period of unbalanced living may eventually lead to a deep sense of fulfillment tied to personal achievement, even if that fulfillment does not erase the costs.

Yet, stories of success are not always stories of fulfillment. Such was the life of Nikola Tesla, whose contributions to science and technology brought him immense professional success but little personal satisfaction. Meanwhile, we may observe fulfillment among those living in a manner completely detached from traditional markers of success—perhaps a religious devotee that finds deep satisfaction in their practice, or a parent whose greatest joy lies in caring for their family. For rise-and-grind culture to hold true value, it must adequately reconcile these distinct concepts of success and fulfillment.

The Dilemma Between Promise and Cost

A major dilemma within rise-and-grind culture lies in the duality of its promises and costs. For every story of extraordinary success achieved through sheer willpower, there are countless others where the relentless pursuit leads to exhaustion, disillusionment, and regret. In celebrating the grind, society has long equated productivity with worth, a narrative reinforced by centuries of cultural and economic forces. The Protestant work ethic, for instance, framed hard work as not only virtuous, but a moral duty. Over time, this perspective, though not strictly rooted in or confined to Protestantism, has become deeply embedded in modern society, where the ability to produce—whether it be wealth, innovation, entertainment, or beauty—determines an individual's value in the eyes of others. This ideological tradition continues to shape how we understand ambition, encouraging the belief that sacrifice is synonymous with value.

But beneath the sleek motivational videos and triumphant success stories, there exists an undercurrent of discontent. It's not uncommon to hear stories of those who climbed all the way to the top, only to find themselves alienated, their relationships strained and sense of purpose eroded. The philosopher Alan Watts once likened this to a society obsessed with "future living," where fulfillment becomes a perpetual horizon—always visible, but forever just out of reach. Rise-and-grind culture thrives on this illusion, urging individuals to press forward at all costs, to believe that happiness will come if and only if we achieve more. But what is enough? And who or what decides? This pursuit of worldly achievement can yield damaging side effects, where rest becomes guilt, failure feels deeply personal, and ambition turns into a source of torment: an internalized fear or belief of inadequacy.

The Hustle in a Digital Age of Toxic Comparison

The rise-and-grind mindset, while universal in its reach, takes on a particular significance in our modern digital age. Social media platforms present curated exhibitions, showcasing endless highlights of success while omitting moments of real adversity. The sometimes not-so-subtle message is that if you aren't succeeding, it must be because you're not waking up early enough, not working hard enough. By erasing context—privilege, opportunity, and even luck—this narrative weaponizes success, creating an environment of toxic comparison where the haves belittle the have nots. These condescensions can instill feelings of shame, especially for those already working tirelessly just to survive.

Even more troubling, certain corners of this culture distort the rise-and-grind message into something far more insidious. Prominent figures within the manosphere blend self-improvement rhetoric with toxic masculinity, fostering exclusionary and misogynistic principles under the guise of empowerment. This narrative preys on frustration and disillusionment, encourages resentment and hostility, and emphasizes dominance as a measure of success. For young men grappling with their sense of fulfillment in an unstable world, this messaging is seductive and deeply harmful.

The overlap between rise-and-grind culture and this darker subculture highlights a troubling truth: ambition, when stripped of ethical grounding, can easily become a force of destruction. This toxic distortion of hustle culture reduces success to status and power

alone, rejecting the more vulnerable aspects of humanity and bringing adherents no closer to the true fulfillment they seek.

Work As Identity

Similarly concerning is how rise-and-grind culture perpetuates the pervasive tendency to tie work to identity. When we introduce ourselves by our profession, it not only describes what we do but implicitly identifies who we are, as though our job alone encapsulates our intrinsic value. This connection can be empowering when our work aligns with our passions, pays well, or both, but it can also become oppressive when it fails to provide one or both. And what about those who cannot work? Their exclusion from this paradigm highlights the complexity and flaws in linking identity so closely to employment. Below is a closer examination of these very real scenarios that help to illustrate the nuance of this problem:

Work That Provides Financial Stability and Purpose

For the most fortunate, work becomes a source of identity because it aligns with what they love and provides financial stability. An artist who earns a decent living through their craft or an entrepreneur thriving in a passion-driven business might feel that their work reflects their truest self—where purpose and security intersect. In this scenario, the work doesn't just pay the bills; it enriches identity and reinforces a sense of fulfillment.

Work That Provides Financial Stability Without Purpose

Some may find themselves doing work they don't love that nevertheless provides financial security. A high-paying corporate job may offer stability and status, but leave a worker feeling unfulfilled, questioning whether the trade-off is worth it. Here, identity is defined by outward success but disconnected from personal values or passion. On the other hand, there are those that don't mind working a job they don't love, so long as it provides them the means to live the way they like otherwise. Whatever the case, working a job that pays well but isn't loved seems to understandably have a lesser potential to shape a person's identity.

Work That Provides Purpose Without Financial Stability

Others, however, pursue work they love while struggling to earn enough to live comfortably. For a teacher who pours heart and soul into their classroom or a musician who dedicates years to their art with little financial reward, the love for their work can remain central to

their identity. But the lack of financial stability adds strain. In these cases, the meaning derived from work coexists with the sacrifices it demands, establishing an identity marked not just by purpose, but also by the struggles endured to sustain it. Those in this scenario may similarly find themselves wondering if the trade-off is worth it; it can be challenging to maintain a sense of fulfillment when life itself is unaffordable.

Work That Provides Neither Purpose Nor Financial Stability

One of the largest groups includes those who neither love their work nor earn enough to be secure. For someone juggling multiple low-wage jobs or enduring exploitative conditions, work isn't a path to identity, passion, or stability; it is survival. Society's insistence on tying identity to productivity can feel particularly cruel in these cases, as it fails to acknowledge the dignity of labor itself and the systemic barriers preventing upward mobility.

Those Unable To Work

Perhaps the most overlooked group includes those unable to work altogether. The severely sick and disabled, often excluded from the workforce and for whom waking up and simply getting through the day can be a monumental effort, face considerable challenges in a society that tends to equate worth with productivity. For this group, even routine tasks that others might take for granted often demand extraordinary perseverance, strength, and resilience. Such experiences serve as strong counterexamples to the idea that value and identity are bound primarily to conventional ideas of productivity.

These scenarios reveal the circumstantial challenges of using work to establish identity. To address this, rise-and-grind culture must challenge the notion that our worth is defined solely by what we produce or how much we earn. All types of work—whether loved, unloved, lucrative, or underpaid—can contain dignity and value. A healthier relationship with work, for those in which it is physically feasible, begins with acknowledging the need for balance: the ability to align labor with personal meaning while ensuring financial security. In this most fortunate and least common of the scenarios, work serves as a meaningful component of a well-rounded life, but even then, it is still not a comprehensive measure of who we are.

The film *Soul* beautifully captures this idea through its protagonist, Joe Gardner, a jazz musician whose ambition to achieve his big break consumes his identity. For Joe, his purpose seems inseparable from his success as an artist, but upon reaching the success he

once sought, he realizes that a meaningful life isn't defined solely by ambition or achievement. In one poignant moment, Joe discovers the beauty of simply living: savoring relationships, everyday experiences, and the small joys that exist outside of work or goals.

This perspective challenges the rise-and-grind philosophy, showing that purpose and fulfillment can exist independent of relentless ambition. Some people may feel deeply tied to their ambitions, finding meaning in pursuing excellence, while others might derive identity and joy from life's quieter, less "productive" moments. Both perspectives are valid, underscoring that ambition is not a universal blueprint for a fulfilling life.

Ambition with Purpose: Where Success Meets Fulfillment

Rise-and-grind culture gets one fundamental truth right: ambition inspires action, which helps to give life direction and meaning. The hard work, discipline, and perseverance it promotes are indeed valuable qualities. However, this philosophy falters when it glorifies productivity as the sole moral virtue for all to strive for. In doing so, it fails to consider the extenuating power of circumstance, severs ambition from purpose, reduces success to external markers—wealth, status, or fame—and often fails to provide genuine, lasting fulfillment.

When ambition does align with purpose, it enriches life rather than consuming it. In contrast, when ambition becomes an empty pursuit or a reflection of societal pressure, it leads to disillusionment, burnout, and isolation. This distinction matters because ambition, in its healthiest form, should push us to strive for more without sacrificing our well-being, relationships, or sense of self. Fulfillment requires balance—knowing when to work, when to rest, and when to reflect on what we truly value.

Rise-and-grind culture must reconcile its ideals with this broader understanding of success and purpose. Ambition is not our enemy, but it must serve a meaningful end. A life well-lived is not defined by any singular goal, but by the collective richness of experiences, connections, and values we hold dear. When placed in this context, ambition transforms from an exhausting pursuit into a fulfilling one—where success becomes more than output and hard work becomes just one aspect of a life lived well.