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THIS IS

*About Life, Joy,
and Owning
Your Purpose*

THE

THING

Introduction

OFTEN THE QUESTIONS WE ask aren't the ones we really want to ask. Maybe it's from a fear of being inappropriate or rude by bringing up things that aren't normally spoken of. Or maybe embarrassment that we are still trying to figure something out that surely everyone else has already figured out. Or maybe because we just can't muster the energy to say what we really want to say.

But more often, rather than being afraid to ask the real questions, we're afraid to give the real answers.

At least, I am.

Over the past few years I have received more and more invitations to speak to audiences around the country as business leaders and particularly people in the healthcare industry want my viewpoint.

Organizers almost always ask me to talk about content from my first book or the lessons I have learned in business and leadership that may be beneficial to their audience.

I usually take questions at the end of my speeches. These Q&A sessions generally follow a similar pattern: The questions start slowly as people try to think of something smart to say and then pick up a little as the conversation progresses. From my viewpoint at the podium

I can always tell who in the audience thinks it's an interesting question by whether they are looking at me or looking down at their phone.

But occasionally, something different happens. Someone will ask a question that has nothing to do with business. The attention and energy in the room sharpens and everyone looks up intently. It's as if they are thinking, "I can't believe they just asked that, but I really want to hear how he answers this." The question is disguised as being a personal one about me, but everyone knows it's really about the questioner. Just by asking the question they are disclosing to everyone in the room that they are asking something about my life because they feel unhealthy, unbalanced, and unhappy in theirs.

But I am the one who has been put on the spot.

A few years ago, I was in a private discussion with one of our company's most senior leaders. She asked me a question that got my attention: "How do you do it?"

"How do I do what?"

"How do you do all of it? How do you run this company, have a family, stay in shape, have a life? How do you stay present with so many distractions? And how do you not get down when there are so many hard things going on?"

Personal questions feel risky because the answers cause exposure. If the questioner doesn't like the answer, they may judge you. Or worse, once they understand your convictions they may feel judged by you.

Our natural defensive response to risk causes us to shy away from giving the real answers that expose us. My go-to in these kinds of moments was to demur with platitudes and surface-level answers that, while true, generally leave the questioner placated but unsatisfied. "It's not all that it seems," or "I've got great people around me," or "I guess I'm good at time management." I began to give one of those types of answers and then paused.

Maybe it was the way she asked, the strain I could hear in her voice, or the desperation in her eyes as she was obviously struggling under the many demands of her life. Maybe it was guilt over not giving an honest answer to the previous ten people who had asked me something personal.

For whatever reason, that day I tentatively began to share some of my most deeply held beliefs with her. Once I started, the dam opened. Suddenly I looked at the clock and realized I had been speaking for almost forty-five minutes.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to preach at you for so long,” I said.

She responded, “No! I have never heard those ideas expressed that way. That is really powerful!”

At my next speech after that encounter, I entered the Q&A session with the recurring fear of getting a question that I wouldn’t want to answer. Sure enough, someone took the microphone and asked me something that, if I was going to answer honestly, would require me to disclose something deeply personal. I confess I don’t remember the question, but I do remember the awkward silence that followed as I stood on stage contemplating whether and how to answer. Finally, I let go of my fear.

In front of hundreds of people, I opened up about my journey. I confessed the struggles I have had of making sense of life, the many places I have gone searching for wisdom, and finally the simple yet profound answers I have discovered. And most importantly the incredible peace and joy I have found through the process.

Amazingly, after the speech, no one in the line of people waiting to talk to me brought up anything about my presentation—they all wanted to talk about their own lives. Their reactions, and the hundreds of similar ones I have received in the years since, have revealed how common our yearning to get something more out of life is. While we rarely talk about it, we are all struggling not only to make sense of it all, but also, more importantly, to actually do something that breaks us

away from our feelings of pain, frustration, or isolation and into an experience that is, well, just better.

All of these interactions are with people who are visibly successful on the outside but obviously craving more on the inside. They have helped me realize the danger of not asking real questions and giving honest answers. And giving real answers to others has forced me to give real answers to myself. If we don't ask the real questions, we'll never get the answers we crave, but if we don't give the real answers, we'll never get the change we need.

I don't know what caused you to pick up this book.

Maybe you've never thought about the purpose of your life. You are doing well, having fun, and enjoying what life has to offer. You work hard, but things seem to come easily, and you just assume that everything will work out. If this describes you—congratulations! You are enjoying a pretty rare kind and time of life. Maybe you are reading this book begrudgingly—only satisfying the recommendation of a friend, parent, or boss. Or maybe, just maybe, it's because deep inside, you suspect that, while you seem to generally enjoy life, there has to be something more. That you are missing out.

Perhaps you consider yourself to be someone who is rather self-aware and continually seeks more in life. You read the books and listen to the podcasts of all the latest gurus. Maybe you consider yourself a person of faith and search for truth in ancient teachings. But you get frustrated with all the self-help guides. Which are you supposed to do? Wait, how many different parts of me are there? How much should I exercise? Am I supposed to eat carbs now or has that changed?

Most likely, you are in the group of us who are just surviving. You work hard to make ends meet, but it feels like you can never quite catch up after the latest surprise expense. You try to be a good friend, spouse, or parent, but it feels like you are always letting someone down or they have let you down. You know you should take care of yourself better,

and last year you even joined a gym, but after a month the reality of life set in, and you stopped going.

Most of the time you are merely going through the motions of the routines of your life. You feel like you are always just trying to keep all the plates spinning. You have some fun—occasionally go on a vacation, go out with friends, or do some hobby that you enjoy. But once that is over, it only makes going back to your routine even worse. When you do get to occasionally pause, you ask yourself things like:

“Is this all there is?”

“Does anything I do matter?”

“What’s the point?”

And when you are honest, you admit to yourself that this isn’t what you thought your life would be like. The optimistic young you would look at who you are today and be disappointed. You were going to be different. You were going to make a difference. You were going to run the business, run a marathon, and see the world. What happened?

Or maybe you actually did all those things. You earned the fortune, bought the house, saw the sites, and achieved the goals you set for yourself. But the morning after the party, the day after the race, or the second time you drove the new car, you wondered:

“Why do I still feel empty?”

Perhaps there was a time when you were happy.

You remember the happy times, the optimistic times. You remember having friends, having fun, and laughing. But then tragedy struck, and nothing has ever been the same. And the question you keep asking is:

“Why did this happen to me?”

Time and time again I have heard people express these kinds of desperate emotions. Our stories are different, but the storyline is the same: We long for something—something different from this. We want to feel fulfilled—to feel at least one moment of fulfillment. We want to find some meaning to it all.

The words we often actually say are: “I just need to figure out what will make me happy.”

If you've ever felt this way, then you're not alone. And there's good news: I believe there are answers.

In the pages ahead, we are going to dive into the hard questions. We will gain perspective through exploring subjects that are often avoided and taking time to understand the amazingly simple and beautiful answers that shape how we view our life. But we won't leave these answers in the realm of philosophical theory. After some honest reflection and self-examination, we will consider every part of our life so that we can apply our answers in ways that help us experience a different kind of life today and start our journey toward more purposeful living.

Now I want to be clear, very few of the ideas behind what I have written about in this book are original to me. One of the most fortunate parts of my life is that I have been exposed to so many incredibly wise people. Over the years, I have synthesized the lessons I've learned from them into a philosophy that has guided how I think about my life and, most importantly, how I make decisions. What I hope is that by putting many of those lessons together, you will discover something that will enable you to start living in an entirely new way.

No matter where you are in life, no matter what questions you are asking, and no matter how you are struggling, I believe there is a way for you to experience the best of what life has to offer.

But here is a warning: Discovering honest answers to real questions is hard work. And frankly, you won't ever find them all, and the ones you do find will change over time. This isn't a one and done. It's step after step along a difficult, challenging, up and down journey.

But what a wonderful journey it can be.

Now let's get started.



About the Author

Shane Jackson is president of Jackson Healthcare^{*}, a family of healthcare workforce businesses that serve over ten million patients each year. He is the author of two books: *Fostering Culture: A Leader's Guide to Purposefully Shaping Culture* (originally published in 2018 with a second edition in 2024) and *This Is the Thing: About Life, Joy, and Owning Your Purpose* (Greenleaf Book Group, 2025). Shane has written for *Fast Company* and *Forbes*, publishes insights on his own platform, ShaneJackson.com, and is a keynote speaker at conferences and events across the country.

