

Kellogg Insight Podcast Transcript:

Let Your Purpose Guide Your Career

Jessica LOVE: At some point in our careers, we all question if we're truly on the right path. But as Nicholas Pearce has seen, some people don't find out the answer until awfully late.

Nicholas PEARCE: I've had conversations with a number of executives, and many of them have achieved great things. But at a certain point in their careers, they looked back over their shoulder and said, "What was it all for?" The market applauded them. Wall Street applauded them. But really what was the net impact of their having been in that role? And some of them were quite ashamed to reflect that, while they were very successful outwardly, they felt like a part of them was dying daily to be in that seat.

LOVE: So how can you make sure you don't make that same mistake? It's a big question—and part of what inspired Pearce to write his new book, *The Purpose Path: A Guide to Pursuing Your Authentic Life's Work*. The good news: It's never too late to start doing the work that reflects your deepest values and priorities.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Welcome to the *Kellogg Insight* podcast. I'm your host, Jessica Love. Nicholas Pearce is a clinical professor at Kellogg. Today on the podcast, Pearce shares what he's gleaned from his firsthand experiences as a teacher, pastor, and consultant. With a little courage, anyone can build a career that, as Pearce puts in, aligns "their role with their soul."

If you want to know whether you're on the right path for you, the first thing Pearce recommends is that you ask yourself a series of questions. Among them: What is success to me? And, given that, am I running the right race? To answer these questions, Pearce says, you need to take time to reflect. That might mean 15 minutes at the end of every day or a weeklong retreat. However you do it, just stepping away from the distractions of daily life can help you clarify what matters most.

PEARCE: This is not about picking a job or picking a career. It's really about thinking what is the impact, the net impact, I want to have made with my life. What is the work that I'm supposed to do?

LOVE: Pearce himself has struggled with these questions, back when he was finishing his PhD at Kellogg. After graduating, his plan was to become a tenure-track professor—the kind of scholar who spends their career teaching and conducting research. Pearce knew that that career sounded awfully good to most people. It comes with a nice salary, prestige, the ability to answer interesting questions about the world, all of that. The problem was, it wasn't *his* idea of success. He was in the wrong race. Because he realized his heart was elsewhere.

PEARCE [from recording of sermon]: You've got to run on and lay hold to your destiny!

LOVE: That's Pearce preaching at Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. You see, he wasn't just a PhD student. He was also a pastor. And not only that—he was also an experienced consultant, who liked working with companies to solve problems. And he worried that if he became a tenure-track professor, this path that everyone assumed he would take...

PEARCE: I would literally have to mute those other areas of my life, and those parts of who I am.

LOVE: Which brings us to the next step in finding your purpose. Once you've figured out what matters most to you, you need to prioritize. Since there's only so much time in the day, you have to ask yourself which things you, PERSONALLY, feel called to work on.

PEARCE: Poverty, globally. Finding a cure to cancer. All of these things are important work, but not all of those are areas I am called to engage in. Just make sure that you're in the lane you're supposed to be in.

LOVE: If you're struggling to figure out what lane that is, you might turn to other people. Pearce says sometimes our family, friends, and mentors see things about us that we don't see ourselves—or that we're afraid to admit. For instance, back when Pearce was a PhD student struggling with his own path, his faculty advisor pulled him aside for what turned out to be a life-changing conversation.

PEARCE: She said to me, "Nicholas, we both know who you are. You are a really, really talented scholar. You ask really good questions. You write very well. But at the same time, we know that you are called to ministry. You are a gifted preacher. We see who you are. When will you acknowledge it?"

LOVE: That conversation helped him figure out what to do after getting his PhD. He decided that instead of going down the research track, he would become clinical professor—meaning, he still gets to work with students. But he would also have time to keep working as a pastor, and to manage his consulting firm, which helps companies and organizations foster diversity and inclusion.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: Figuring out your purpose is one thing. But acting on that discovery is another challenge entirely. So once you know what you want to do, how can you actually start *doing* it? Often, Pearce says, there comes a moment where you just have to take a risk.

PEARCE: It doesn't mean that we need to be careless, or thoughtless, but sometimes we do need to summon the courage to take the leap, even if that leap means we don't necessarily quit our job right away. But we start on a path of preparation, such that, that pivot will be a little bit smoother when the time comes.

LOVE: That might mean taking an evening class, or volunteering somewhere that could lead to new opportunities. But sometimes it does mean making a really big change. Pearce tells the story of a former student named Carmita Semaan. She was working in the corporate world, on a successful career path, when she realized that the work she was doing was not what mattered to her. What she really cared about was education. In particular, she realized that very few of the leaders shaping education policy today were people of color. And, Pearce explains, she wanted to change that.

PEARCE: And to do this, she emptied her bank accounts and drew on a significant portion of her retirement savings, because she saw a problem that she knew she had to solve. So she recognized that as a leader of color, she had been called to lead the movement that would benefit generations of kids and leaders just like herself.

LOVE: In 2014, Semaan launched a nonprofit called The Surge Institute, focused on preparing new leaders to shape American education. Through the Institute, she's been able to help train dozens of diverse professionals in several cities.

PEARCE: Her story proves that this vocational courage can come at significant personal expense—yet it often comes with the promise or potential of living the life that you were uniquely designed to live. And so sometimes we have to take the risk, we have to take the leap.

LOVE: The final thing to keep in mind, according to Pearce: What matters most to you might change and evolve over the course of your career. So it's important to keep checking in with yourself.

PEARCE: The reality is, the purpose path is not a 100% guarantee. It is a journey that you have to revisit again and again. But ultimately, there can be a very deep sense of knowing that you are truly in the right place, in the right role, at the right time.

[musical interlude]

LOVE: This program was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to Nicholas Pearce. You can find his book *The Purpose Path: A Guide to Pursuing Your Authentic Life's Work* on shelves now.

As a reminder, you can find us on iTunes, Google Play, or our website. If you like this show, please leave us a review or rating. That helps new listeners find us. And visit us at insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu, where you can find more tips for doing work that reflects your values.

We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of the *Kellogg Insight* podcast.