

Elevating
the
Human
Experience

**THREE PATHS TO
LOVE AND WORTH
AT WORK**

Amelia Dunlop

WILEY

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Praise for *Elevating the Human Experience*

“Elevating the Human Experience offers a roadmap for bringing our whole selves through the door at work to forge richer relationships and to create more affirming work environments.”

—Enshalla Anderson, Global Head of Brand Strategy,
Google Cloud

“This is an outrageously intelligent and heartfelt book. Women will identify with Amelia, and men will learn important secrets from her.”

—Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul* and *Soul Therapy*

*“Brilliant and brave. Brilliant because of the stories, models, and applications that compose *Elevating the Human Experience*. Brave because it is a rarely discussed truth that love *is* the unseen guiding force in all great work. Amelia Dunlop bridges the most human of all emotions with the desire for worth and purpose in a new and profound way. One of the most original books of its kind in years.”*

—David Baum, PhD, DMin, author of *Lightning in a Bottle*, *Proven Lessons for Leading Change*, and *The Randori Principles*

“By organizing this incisively original, deeply personal meditation around the vital concepts of love and worth, Amelia Dunlop takes her place among the truly distinctive thinkers to have addressed this most important of questions: enhancing lived human experience.”

—**Rogan Kersh**, Provost and Professor, Wake Forest University

“Amelia Dunlop makes the bold proposition that we should be the same person at work as we are at home. She adds the equally bold idea that love (of self and others) should be a part of our work lives. Through her own vulnerability in these pages, she invites us to open up, to connect, and to adopt the radical idea that we can be fully human, even in that place we call ‘work.’ This book is for managers and the managed, for-profit and nonprofit, secular corporations and religious institutions, companies big and small—any organization that wants team members to think creatively, speak boldly, work passionately, collaborate deeply, and actually thrive at work.”

—**Aaron M. G. Zimmerman**, Episcopal priest; host of Same Old Song podcast

“*Elevating the Human Experience: Love and Worth at Work* is personal; it’s insightful; and it’s exactly what is needed right now as many of us reckon with how to reconcile our humanity and our careers.”

—**Dane Jensen**, CEO, Third Factor; author of *The Power of Pressure*

“This book represents a heartfelt and deep paradigm shift. While most business leaders walk on eggshells trying to describe the humanity and emotional well-being of their workforce, Amelia Dunlop, simply and satisfyingly, asks us to love.”

—**Renato Mazziro**, Vice President, Experience and Innovation, Thrivent

“The prospect of a workplace that incorporates love as a means of unlocking, even transforming the humans who comprise it, is a bold stroke. Connecting investment in the human experience at work with individual and organizational performance, *Elevating the Human Experience* is a refreshing and inspiring work.”

—**Tim NeCastro**, president and CEO, Erie Insurance Group

Elevating the Human Experience

Three Paths to Love and Worth at Work

By

Amelia Dunlop

WILEY

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To my mother and father

Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness.

—Sigmund Freud

Preface

Ever since I was a little girl, I struggled to feel worthy of love. I didn't know what to call it as a child, but as I lay in bed at night in the room I shared with my older brother, the evidence seemed to mount in that direction. Something always seemed to be a bit off, crooked, like the pinky finger on my right hand that does not straighten. Children would be equal parts fascinated and repulsed by my crooked finger. I would proudly tell them that it was "genetic," using a big word to tell them that I was born that way. And, no, as weird as it looked, it did not hurt. Sometimes they wouldn't believe me, and they would try to force my finger to straighten, pushing it down as hard as they could under a pile of books. That did hurt. And my crooked finger reminded me, and them, that I was not quite worthy.

It was my mother who noticed that I could not see or hear what other children could. She tells the story of watching me sit dressing my Barbies on the rug while she called my name from across the room. As she tells it, I never looked up, never heard her. I have no memory of this. I had surgery on my ears at age four, and by then I had a 70% hearing loss. My eyes, we discovered later, were closer to blind than they were to 20/20 vision.

As the world around me grew quieter and more out of focus, I have a clear memory—a memory that I trust in that unreliable and murky place of what we piece together of our past from photograph and story—of running through Heathrow Airport holding my mother's hand to catch a plane to leave our life in London and my father behind. I was five years old. There are no photographs of that day. Although grown-up details have certainly colored in the outlines of memory, I remember feeling the urgency. I felt

the suddenness of being woken up in the middle of the night, which was probably just in the predawn hours before I normally woke. I felt the leaving-quietly-ness. I felt the need to hush or to be told again to hush. I felt the need to stop asking why and just put my shoes on, which had laces too difficult for me to tie. I remember wondering why we were running when they had these magical sidewalks that could move for you down the long corridors of the airport. I felt the tug of my mother's hand to please-move-faster-or-we-might-miss-our-plane. Once seated in our row, my mother turned it into a sort of holiday for my brother and me. We were going to visit her mother in Fort Lauderdale, our nana. It would be sunny and warm there. "Wouldn't that be nice?" And the rest of the movie memory fades. That's it. That's all I have of how I went from being a little English girl, living with her mother, father, and brother in their brownstone house near the Clapham tube station, attending an all-girls school, to being a little not-quite-American girl, living with her grandmother in the spare bedroom of her bungalow in Fort Lauderdale, attending a school where I was known for my funny British accent and crooked little finger.

Upon arrival in Florida, my mother cut off my hair as if to complete the transformation from someone I knew to someone I did not. I had had long brown hair just past my shoulders that used to be pinned back with barrettes and pink ribbons to match my dresses. My mother told me it would be too hot for such long hair (even though she did not cut hers, I noticed). She got my brother and me matching bowl cuts at the local Supercuts. There are photos of us looking like twins in matching yellow and blue striped rugby shirts. I'm the slightly shorter twin missing her two front teeth. I'm smiling. My memory is not of smiling about that shorn version of myself. Since I turned eighteen, I have worn my hair to the middle of my back.

No doubt my mother and father would have explained to me in whatever words they could summon, words that left no memory, that they were getting a divorce. It wasn't unusual, or traumatic to anybody else except my brother and me. We felt, both he and I, marked as different. We noticed that in our new life that we were the only kids on the block living with their grandmother and not with two parents. I felt that I was not worthy of the perfect mother plus father, plus two kids love square, which we saw on every American television channel and heard in every story book in the early '80s.

The rest of my early childhood looked normal. I started taking dance classes on Saturday mornings. I made my first friend and First Holy Communion in second grade. We rode our bicycles to Dairy Queen to get soft serve ice cream. The Domino's pizza delivery man came to the door some Friday nights. We jumped waves at the beach. But still I knew something was not quite right. I was a bowl-headed, British-accented girl who burned easily in the sun. I wore a neon green nose plug so that I didn't get water up my nose, infecting the scar tissue in my ears. I still burn with shame at my ridiculous-looking, near-blind, near-deaf unworthy little girl self.

My brother reminded me that we each tried to run away more than once, to run away from that uncomfortable, unworthy feeling. I remember the need-to-get-away feeling when there seemed to me no cure for the way I felt. I can still see my mother calling for me to come into dinner while I hid high up in the tree in the front garden of my grandmother's house where she would not see me in the growing dusk. I remember her voice changing to higher pitches of urgency as she called and called and called my name. The urgency in her tone shifted to anger. I let her feel fear and anger. I felt fear and anger too. Like my

mother, I didn't have words to express my complicated feelings, so I hid instead.

From my early childhood experiences, I learned at a deep subconscious level that I was not worthy. My feelings of unworthiness needed to be hidden at all costs. Nobody asked that little girl how she felt about leaving her country, her father, her school, her neighborhood, her house, her bedroom, and her hair behind. With my crooked finger, near-sighted eyes, and near-deaf ears, physically I was certainly less than whole. My memories came with near endless tears. I told myself that I had the “gift of tears” because I cried most days of most weeks of most years. I just thought that was what you did—that was the experience of being human.

I wondered and hoped that maybe I would someday feel worthy of love, if I just worked hard enough or fell in love like they did in storybooks. I wondered if there was a different, better experience of what it meant to be human beyond my reach, but that other people around me seemed to experience. I realize now I suffered as a child. I say that not in any way to blame my mother and father, who raised me as best they could, and equally not to say that my suffering was any flavor of special. While my experiences may have been unique, my suffering was the incredibly ordinary universal kind. But to little-girl me, the feeling of suffering filled my universe. It was my struggle. What I didn't realize then is that it was my suffering that made me most normal, most human. Suffering did not make me unworthy of love. It made my story the same as the story of everyone else who struggles at times to feel worthy of love, which I could never possibly know.

This book is for people who know what it is like to struggle to feel loved and worthy, when they show up at work. You may struggle to bring your femaleness or maleness, your

motherness or fatherness, your Blackness or Brownness, your gayness or Lesbian-ness, your real identity authentically to work. It is also for the people who have no idea what it may feel like to struggle every day to feel loved and worthy, but love people and lead people who do.

For me, the journey to find the love and worth that makes the experience of being human somehow better, somehow elevated, is a personal one. Although there are times I still very much want to hide my real self up in that tree in my grandmother's garden again, I am learning to come down out of the tree, to show up as my real, vulnerable, authentic self, even at work. Especially at work.

Introduction

The first time I heard the phrase *elevating the human experience* was at work. It was the spring of 2018 in a meeting with my new boss and his newly formed leadership team. I thought, “He is crazy if he thinks we will ever say those words out loud to each other, much less to a potential client.” They sounded like an aspiration, worthy of striving towards but just out of reach. I wondered what they could possibly mean for me, for my colleagues in the world's largest professional services firm, for our clients and the people they served. For some of my peers, who had been laboring and loving quietly for years, the words were affirming and inspiring like a Zen koan: *You know you have elevated the human experience because your heart feels full when you are done.* For others, the words “elevating the human experience” were easy to mock, for all of the ways we daily fall short of living up to them in the workplace, for all the ways we feel anything but worthy of love when we show up at work.

I can hear the objections now. “Love is best left squarely in the domain of one's personal life,” so let's define love. Love is not a warm feeling or attachment. It is not only about the romantic or erotic. There is a lesser-known version of love the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, often translated as “human flourishing.” Building on the Greeks, and adapting from Eric Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, **let's define love as the choice to extend yourself for the purpose of your own or another's growth.** We grow people and we grow things that we care about. The outcome of this love is flourishing.

“Love is the choice to extend yourself for the purpose of your own or another’s **growth.**”

Equally, my philosophy of leadership is a philosophy of love. *People become, people grow, and people are capable of remarkable things when you believe in and love them.* These people are our family members and friends. And these people are our co-workers, because our co-worker is child to some parent, friend to some friend, all worthy of love.

“Worth” is often used to mean something or someone's extrinsic value that can be externally verified. It is the sort of worth derived from something else. But it can also mean something or someone's intrinsic value, just for being, before they say or do anything. This book is about love that leads to growth and worth that is intrinsic to each of us. Putting them together, **Elevating the human experience is about acknowledging intrinsic worth as a human, and nurturing growth through love.** Sometimes the person we need to see as most worthy of love is ourselves. Sometimes it is another person. Sometimes it is a group of people who have been unseen.



Elevating the Human

Experience is about
acknowledging intrinsic worth
as a human, and nurturing
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There is an overabundance of books about the possibility of transformative growth for individuals or transformative growth for organizations. Digital transformations. Customer transformations. Employee transformations. But how do you transform an organization, which is a community of living and breathing humans, if you don't grow and transform the humans? How do you build a movement to inspire and motivate people to think, believe, and act in new ways? Where is the new source of untapped potential energy if not inside the human heart and the transformative capacity to love? There are compelling visionary leaders who know intuitively how to tap into the heart as well as the mind, but what about the rest of us who show up to work every day? How do we tap into the transformative power of love and intrinsic worth that helps us flourish in our lives and in our work?

Before we jump in, let's acknowledge the fact that just putting the words "love," "worth," and "work" together in a sentence feels risky and provocative. There are those who might believe work is nothing more than a means to a livelihood, not a place to find their worth. Equally, I imagine as I write these words that you may conjure images of inappropriate workplace relationships and be more than

uncomfortable because we are talking about love and work in the same breath. We could use another word for “love.” We could talk about making another's experience better through respect or purpose. We could talk about care or well-being. But why should we? Why should we shy away from using the word “love” to describe our experience in the workplace? Why does it make us feel uncomfortable to consider loving our colleagues or our boss or being loved in return? We care for the people we work with and want to be cared for. Love is indeed present at work; we just don't feel comfortable talking about it.

I can only speculate as to the many reasons it is uncomfortable for most of us to talk about love at work. Here are some of mine. It makes me uncomfortable because, until quite recently, I had a distorted and monochromatic view of what “love” means. I thought it was reserved for my closest personal relationships, not for my professional persona. I thought, as a woman, using the word at work would instantly be viewed as feminine and weak. I thought that for a mother it might be seen as the opposite of smart, logical, and strong. I thought it would make it even harder to prove that I belonged at the table and should be taken seriously. And, worst of all, I thought talking about love and worth in the workplace would be a short walk to unwanted sexual advances and innuendo.

My male friends and colleagues have told me that it makes them uncomfortable to talk about love and worth at all, much less at work, because from a very young age—four or five years old—they were taught that it was not acceptable for a boy to show emotions. “Boys who cried or showed weakness were beaten, mocked, or both,” one male friend shared with me. And so, my friend concluded, it is not surprising that talking about love and worth at work feels as dangerous as the third rail. Anything that approaches the type of closeness that might be called love in the

workplace is rife with potential danger, misinterpretation, and unnamed boundaries that might accidentally (or not so accidentally) be crossed. For him, and for many men like him, work is simply about “what needs to be done.” It is safer that way.

Equally, there are many who believe that a company exists primarily because of its ability to create a financial impact. If it did not create that impact, it would cease to exist. A company exists to create both a financial impact and a human impact, for the employees, customers, partners, shareholders, and broader community of stakeholders. What I argue is that every exchange in the workplace has two outcomes. One is the outcome of the transaction, which leads either toward greater or lesser financial profit. The second is the outcome of the human experience, which leads either to a better or worse impact for the humans. While never losing sight of the need for performance for a business to continue to exist, this book is focused on the impact of the human experience and the paths to love and worth in the workplace that ultimately contribute to better performance.

Why Elevating the Human Experience Is Necessary

I have come to believe that elevating the human experience is not only possible at work, but it is also necessary to fuel growth that leads to the joy of human flourishing for four reasons:

1. ***Elevating the human experience is necessary because the fundamental human condition is one of suffering.***

Every religious tradition, every culture, has its way of articulating the unmistakable fact of suffering through loss, craving, aversion, and distorted views of reality. Suffering doesn't know the boundaries of our personal or professional selves, so we bring our very human, suffering selves to work with us each day. Our suffering is exacerbated because we spend the majority of our waking hours not surrounded by our related and chosen loved ones, but rather we spend them at work. Collectively, in the US, we currently work more than any other culture at any other time in history. Working more, for many, can make us feel increasingly lonely and isolated. And yet, as our time spent working increases, our time spent in civic, neighborhood and religious institutions, which have traditionally provided a sense of meaning, purpose, and worth, has declined. The number of people who identify as atheist or having "no particular" religious affiliation has gone up from 17% in 2009 to 26% in 2019, according to Pew research. Prior generations, and other cultures, might well be mystified both that we spend so much of our lives working and that we expect our places of work to carry the weight of loving us and acknowledging our worthiness. Because suffering is inevitable, because suffering follows us to work and is exacerbated by our work, we can and ought to make the choice to make the experience of being human for each other and for ourselves, just a bit better.

- 2. Elevating the human experience is necessary because workplaces have exacerbated, if not created, the problems of burnout, lack of inclusion, lack of diversity, and lack of meaning and purpose.***

We talk about some of the problems we face at work in isolation, as though overwork leading to burnout and mental health issues; lack of meaning and purpose; bias on the basis of race, sex, age, or ability; and unethical irresponsible actions are unrelated to each other, when in fact these “work” problems are all different facets of the struggle to be recognized as worthy of love just for being human. We talk as though the experience of being treated well or treated poorly as a customer is fundamentally different from the experience of being treated well or poorly as a member of the workforce. When you see and love the whole person as worthy, there is no difference.

3. *Elevating the human experience is necessary because it leads to more productive and creative outcomes at work.*

In our research, 84% of people said that they do their best work when they feel worthy.