

DAVID E. MARLOW

The

Ikigai

Way

A Simple Path for Living
a Life of Purpose

Praise for *The Ikigai Way*

Do you find yourself wondering “is that all there is” after hitting your big life goals? Are happiness and purpose still eluding you? Or, are you stuck in the grind of the “shoulds” on your list wondering if you’ll ever get to live life instead of life living you? David Marlow’s *The Ikigai Way* is what you’ve been looking for: a step-by-step guide to the life you’ve always wanted answering the questions you never quite knew how to ask.

—April Shprintz

Business Accelerator, Creator of The Generosity Culture®
and Award-Winning Author of
Magic Blue Rocks: The Secret to Doing Anything
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/aprilshprintz>

For a couple of years now, David’s personal, poignant musings on Ikigai have graced my weekly reading and given me a touchstone for professional reflection.

At a time when, as committed professionals, our personal and professional lives are inextricably interwoven . . . a battle, really, for the self . . . David’s musings have been an inspiration to developing a centered, focused mindset, to align common priorities, and to craft a unified way forward as a whole person. I’m deeply grateful for his own deeply personal insights.

Now . . . a book! Nothing short of a roadmap . . . complete and orchestrated . . . to help guide us toward full potential for a balanced life. This book, like his weekly musings, will certainly become a touchstone for balance.

—Gordon RAY

Lecturer in Management, Technology, and Strategy,
Grenoble Ecole de Management
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/gordon-ray>

At last: The Ikigai Guy between two covers! For those people, like myself, who’ve been part of David Marlow’s LinkedIn community these past few years, this publication is a welcome evolution. In these pages, you’ll find generous helpings of Marlovian material: Etymologies galore! War stories from corporate life! Cute anecdotes about single-letter grandkids! A plethora of life lessons from running and the Marines! And then some! You ought to look into this *Way of Ikigai* thing.

—Ken Gordon

Chief Communications Specialist, EPAM Continuum
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/gordonken>

David Marlow is a gifted writer, highly accomplished leader, and a master of Ikigai who expertly guides people to connect with and joyfully live in alignment with their unique purpose. I find David's insights and sage storytelling to be immensely thought provoking and inspiring. I'm excited to delve deeper into the ideas he shares in his new book!

—**Andrea Choate**

Founder, Soul Mechanics Healing

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/andreachoate>

I've been a fan of David Marlow, as a person, social media influencer, and ardent follower of his work for nearly eight years. It's no exaggeration to say that he's one of the foremost authorities on the Japanese concept of IKIGAI.

Beyond his ability to personally connect with his audience, his writing is a masterful blend of precision and wit, never wasting a word yet always leaving you with a smile. I'm excited about reading his new book because I'm guaranteed that it will be another brilliant example of how he can capture my imagination while delivering profound insights.

I can't wait to get my hands on a copy, and you shouldn't hesitate to buy one either. Marlow's stuff is "must-read" for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of purpose and fulfillment.

—**Monte Pedersen**

Principal/Owner, The CDA Group LLC

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/monte-pedersen-9554a1126>

Dave entertains, instigates, educates and inspires. Sometimes he magically manages to do all of those things in a single paragraph or story. I'm thankful for his thoughtful, accessible approach to helping me uncover my purpose and embrace my Ikigai.

—**Mark Cumicek**

"The Dream Dude"

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/markcumicek>

In a world where we feel overrun and overwhelmed by options, or conflicted between aspirations and obstacles, comes the guidance of David Marlow and his Ikigai quest. From the moment you are able to grasp the concept as he lays it out, one feels that they have embarked on a trail where they can only see the rest of the path, and the next scene emerge around the corner, as we walk the first steps available to us. Uncovering one's reason for existence gradually impacts everything we do . . . on purpose.

—**Scott Boddie**

(Director of Organizational Development PATTERN4building)

Nationally Recognized Mental Health Advocate LinkedIn Top Voice

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/scott-boddie>

Unlock the power of your Ikigai with David Marlow's insightful and action-oriented debut. This book offers a profound vision of living one's Ikigai, paired with practical, manageable steps to make it a daily reality. It's an empowering read, designed to support and inspire readers in a refreshingly informal and approachable way, boosted with maximum clarity and momentum-building ideas.

—**Adam Hansen**

(author of *Outsmart Your Instincts: How the Behavioral Innovation Approach Drives Your Company Forward*)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/adhansen>

Working with David Marlow to craft my Ikiverse has given me a powerful, life-changing tool that helps me live my purpose each day. My Ikiverse is a reminder of why I'm here, what's important to me, and how I can best spend my time and energy. Having my Ikiverse makes it easy for me to communicate my purpose and values to others, and it also serves as a touchstone for helping make sure my decisions are aligned with my Ikigai.

When I'm feeling lost or not quite myself, a read through my Ikiverse always brings me back to myself. It's become one of my favorite tools for knowing and staying true to myself. I will always be grateful for the gentle and supportive way David has helped me craft and live by my Ikiverse, and I'm excited to see the impact his new book will have on the world.

—**Amanda Stern**

(founder Good Things Come to Those Who Journal)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/amandasternjournaling>

David Marlow possesses a singular talent for simplifying complex ideas in the form of practical, inspirational wisdom. His insights and observations are penetrating, ceaselessly relevant, and guaranteed to set you on course for living a more successful and satisfying life. You can't help but come away from his work with feelings of gratitude and exhilaration.

—**Rabbi Yonason Goldson**

(author of *Grappling With the Gray: An Ethical Handbook for Personal Success and Business Prosperity*)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/yonason-goldson>

I've been reading Dave's writing for the past three years. Now you may think you know what this book is about when you see Ikigai on the cover. But I guarantee you'll be surprised by the originality and depth of Dave's thinking. As a bonus, his work is informed by decades of lived experience and peppered with humor. Read this book!

—**Kat (Katrijn) van Oudheusden**

(author of *Selfless Leadership: A Complete Guide to Awakening the Servant Leader Within*)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/katrijnvo>

David is one of the most insightful, intuitive and brilliant thinkers I know in the area of purpose, Ikigai and strategy. He opened my eyes and gave me new perspectives around Ikigai that I hadn't considered. His writing, storytelling and teachings engage and inspire in a way that honors the learner and expands their thinking. You will want to keep this book with you as a resource and a guide throughout your life.

—**Jean Marie DiGiovanna**

(author of *Stop Talking Start Asking: 27 Questions to Shift the Culture of Your Organization*)

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/jeanmariedigiovanna>

In his book, David guides us on a journey to uncover a deeper self-understanding. He helps us rise above the noise and programming, rediscovering our essential selves to live from a place of inner wisdom and vitality.

This journey isn't prescriptive; rather, it offers a map and compass to reflect on our past and envision the future we wish to explore. The book's ideas are clear, concise catalysts for self-reflection, prompting us to question and disrupt self-limiting beliefs and outdated mental models that hold us back from answering life's bigger questions.

—**David McLean**

(Executive Counselor McLean & Company)

LinkedIn Top Voice 2022

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidmcleanatgetkeepgrow>

Dave's insights have always inspired me to push deeper, both personally and professionally. His unique approach to Ikigai is powerful yet accessible, making complex ideas feel approachable and transformative. I'm excited to explore these concepts further in his new book.

—**Rishita Jones MCIPD**

(Featured contributor BIZCATLYST 360° and LinkedIn Top Voice)

Ever since David Marlow and I were high school friends during his radio DJ days, I have appreciated David's humor, perspective, and outlook on life. He is a lifelong learner with a love of improving things and helping people discover their identity, gifts, and purpose. He is a great communicator with a knack for saying things in new ways that make sense. I know you'll appreciate this book!

—**Rev. Dr. Clark Cowden**

Senior Pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood, CA

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/clark-cowden-042b19a;>

<https://clarkdcowden.wordpress.com>

Having had a chance to preview David's book, I'm so excited for others to experience his process, tips, reflective questions, and abundant stories. As a follower of his work for several years, I learned so much more. It inspired me to spend time creating my Ikiverse!

—**Melissa Carson**

CEO Canopy Strategies, author of

A Perfect Life Is Not the Goal: A Practical Guide to Loving the Life You Are Living
and *There Is No Such Thing as a Perfect Job: A Practical Guide to Loving Your Work Life*

Uncovering our Ikigai can be a confusing and, at times, disheartening experience, but David's guidance will make your own Ikigai journey just a little bit clearer. David thoughtfully unpacks what Ikigai means through a plethora of relatable stories and actionable frameworks. We all deserve a life that is filled with purpose—let David's book show you the way!

—**Peter Nakamura**

Host of The Ikigai Project podcast

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/peternakamura>;
<https://shows.acast.com/6244f09bbac91e00126bad9a>

David reminds me to treasure life. Although, I don't often heed his advice. The truth is that living purposefully is hardly a fairy tale. As a dad and a business owner, I'm probably doing it wrong more often than not.

And yet we persist. That's the point (I think). The point of living purposefully. Part of what I'm learning from him. To embrace life's challenges and appreciate the gift that is a life experienced daily.

He calls this Ikigai.

—**Daniel Furfaro**

(Founder and Brand Strategist at Brandmoves)

Dave showed me that every moment plays a part in my journey. Sometimes, you have to laugh, and sometimes, you have to frown, but it all makes sense in the big picture. That is why I love his Ikigai storytelling; his book triggers questions and motivates me to find answers.

—**Ivona Hirschi**

(LinkedIn Top Voice) Founder & Chief Content Officer leadink
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ivona-hirschi-05301270>

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A Simple Path for Living
a Life of Purpose

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To everyone who has ever felt like they were created for something more.

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Prologue

Begin, to Become

A SPIRIT ENTERS the creation as a child. A new beginning, innocent, not knowing the ways of this world. Immediately, the child needs lessons taught, and burdens placed so that it can operate in society. And as the young child learns the ways of this realm, it becomes a camel to bear the ever-heavier lessons and burdens.

Now, as a camel, it grows strong and mature, able to endure the weights it must carry. Each burden's increase is accompanied by a nod of approval from the world. The camel's pride soars with each plaudit even as the memory of life as a child begins to fade.

A quiet desperation falls on the camel as carrying the increasing lading, once thought of as a prodigious achievement, becomes too much. No longer willing to add obligations and unable to drop the burden it already carried, the camel seeks freedom by fleeing into the wilderness.

In the deepest, densest, darkest part of the primordial demesne, exhausted from running, the camel collapses. That is when the second transformation occurs. Lying on the mossy ground, the camel, its burden now vanished, becomes a lion.

Though no longer carrying the load of the camel, the lion is not yet free and must face an even bigger challenge. Reigning over the wilderness is a sparkling golden dragon; the great “Thou Shalt.” Peerless in size, on every one of its scales of gold was each etched a “Thou Shalt.” A thousand years of rules, and another thousand years of order glittered on those scales. And each “Thou Shalt” was written in the language of the default.

The lion followed the decrees of “Thou Shalt,” fearful of the fire-breathing beast. Though strict and uncompromising the dragon provided security and a framework. For a time, the lion prospered in the wilderness.

Until one day the illusion and arbitrariness of this default space became too much to bear, and the lion declares it will be free, “I will,” said the lion.

“Thou Shalt,” bellowed the gilded behemoth, and a great battle began. The lion attacked the dragon, dodging blasts of fire to one by one remove the golden plates with his carnassial teeth. With each scale removed, the dragon weakened.

Though singed during every bout, the lion continued the fight until at last the final auric decree was removed and “Thou Shalt,” the once fearsome lord of the wilderness fell to the forest floor never to move again.

With the dragon defeated, the lion returned to being a child. In the child was found once again, innocence, a life at play and still more. In the re-born child is a new beginning as a self-rolling wheel, a first movement, a holy yea to life as it was meant to be.

1

What Is Ikigai?

FROM CHILD TO camel to lion to child again with slaying a doyen dragon thrown in for good measure. The allegory presented in the prologue represents the three stages of inner transformation required to live a life of purpose: the taking back of our story.¹

Ever feel like a thousand years of “Thou Shalt” scales have held you back? The demands of “shoulds,” “have tos,” and “oughts” keeping you from the life you want, from life as it was meant to be?

Those societal forces that are both necessary and restrictive are constraints we needed to survive that must be thrown off if we are to thrive. The process of removing the “Thou Shalts” is the Ikigai way. Before we commence slaying dragons, it is best to explain what Ikigai is and what it is not.

Ikigai is a Japanese compound word made up of two words, “iki,” meaning life and “kai,” loosely translated as reason, or reason to live. Through a unique characteristic of Japanese pronunciation when the two words are combined the “k” of “kai” transposes to “g” and becomes Ikigai.

It is pronounced with “E” as in a long ē, “key” as in what you use to unlock a door, and “guy,” like the guy writing this book.

Ē•key•guy

If you search the internet, you are likely to come upon a four-circle Venn diagram in various incarnations espousing Ikigai as the intersection of four things.

- What you love (or are passionate about).
- What the world needs.
- What you are good at.
- What you can be paid to do.

There is some dispute as to the origin of both the diagram and the idea that your Ikigai can be found at the intersection of these four things.

Regardless of the origin, the “Venn Garden,” as I like to call it, is not Ikigai in any traditional sense and has the additional problem of being focused exclusively on career.

While our careers and making a living are important, life is far more than our jobs. Professions come and go; our “reason for living” remains.

It would be accurate to say that Ikigai is a philosophically profound concept that’s difficult to describe or define succinctly. While true, that isn’t particularly helpful in understanding and embracing your life purpose. This book will support you by bridging the gap between the theoretical concept of Ikigai and its practical application.

Later in this chapter, I’ll offer a richer, more comprehensive definition that will reconcile the abstract concept of the Venn Garden and the true meaning of Ikigai. We’ll explore this in detail, but for now, let me illustrate the contrast through a story.

An Unexpected Miracle

My wife and I were blessed with two sons early in our marriage. After several years, we were informed by doctors that she couldn’t have any more children, which we now know was due to complications related to multiple sclerosis. Lo and behold, six years after our youngest son was born my wife became pregnant again. Like the old Yiddish proverb, “Man plans, God laughs.” Our miracle baby was a little girl and from the time she was born, our only daughter was determined to keep up with her two older brothers.

With her brothers playing baseball she started in T-ball. For those unfamiliar, T-ball is a beginner form of baseball. It introduces you to some basic concepts of the game but isn’t the complete game. Both boys played on championship teams as kids with our youngest son ultimately playing in college. As a result, my daughter was used to watching people play the game at an advanced level.

Her T-ball career started off less than auspiciously as she is left-handed and the coach lined her up on the plate like a right-handed batter, the wrong side for her. As soon as he backed away, she switched sides and promptly hit the ball into center field well beyond any of the opposing players.

She ran to first base and kept going until somewhere on her way around all the bases a coach stopped her and sent her back to first. While we couldn't hear the conversation, still fuming, she would later recount, "I don't know why he stopped me, I totally could have scored." In T-ball they don't keep score, you can only go one base at a time, and there aren't positions. The ball is placed on a tee and players are allowed as many swings as they need to get a hit.

All of this frustrated my daughter, with the final indignity coming at the end of the season when she was given a "participation trophy" for being on the team. She wanted to play real games and tournaments and get a trophy for winning a championship, like her brothers.

Baseball, on the other hand, is a far more nuanced and rewarding experience. It allows you to uncover and develop many skills and get to know more about yourself and what you are made of as a person. There is strategy and drama, success and failure.

The Venn Garden is the T-ball version of Ikigai. Enough elements of the game to seem like the real thing though ultimately only a cursory experience. The equivalent of a participation trophy. Growth in Ikigai can be much like in other practices, such as learning a sport. You start small, and then, when ready, you take it to another level. If you are reading this, you are ready for the grown-up version of the game of Ikigai.

There are three fundamental questions we all seek to answer in life.

Who am I?

Why am I here?

What should I do?

This book supports you in answering those questions.

"There is a place in the soul that neither time nor space nor no created thing can touch."

—Meister Eckhart²

There is within us, something that transcends the superficial categorizations of skills and careers. It's this essence that forms the core of our Ikigai. As promised, I offer a richer, more comprehensive definition:

Ikigai is expressing your essence and purpose in harmony with whatever you do.

Understanding Ikigai in this way breaks free of the constraints of defining ourselves solely by our careers or jobs. Framing Ikigai in this way supports our fundamental drive to answer those three most important questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What should I do?

Who Am I?

Ikigai begins with understanding your essence. The Latin root for essence is *esse* or “to be.” Your essence is the most sacred core of who you are. That part of your nature without which you would not exist or be.

It is a place within, untouched by setbacks, sorrows, judgment, and pain. A place in the soul free of scars that is peaceful, confident, brave, and true. That exquisite untouched spirit is who you are and were always meant to be.

Why Am I Here?

Your purpose, the reason you are here, can be described as your intention, skills, gifts, talents, passions, and calling. There is a reason you were born, that is your purpose.

What Should I Do?

That is perhaps the most difficult of the three questions to answer. First you must understand that what you do isn't as important as how you do it. Whatever you do, whether working, walking, whipping up an egg breakfast, everything should be in service and harmony to who you are and why you are here.

Ikigai then isn't your purpose or your identity, it is a way and approach to live out your purpose and identity expressing them in every part of your life. Your Ikigai can be expressed in myriad ways and

every aspect of life. In fact, expressing your essence and purpose in everything you do is Ikigai.

Those three questions we all want resolved of **Who**, **What**, and **Why** are answered *with Ikigai*.

- Who you are at your deepest levels. (Essence)
- Why you are here, your intention, gifts, talents, passions, and calling. (Purpose)
- What you are doing, in harmony with your essence and purpose. (Harmony)

The Ikigai Nexus

To further illustrate how Ikigai addresses these questions, I've developed the Ikigai Nexus (see Figure 1.1). This visual representation brings to life our definition of Ikigai: expressing your essence and purpose in harmony with whatever you do.

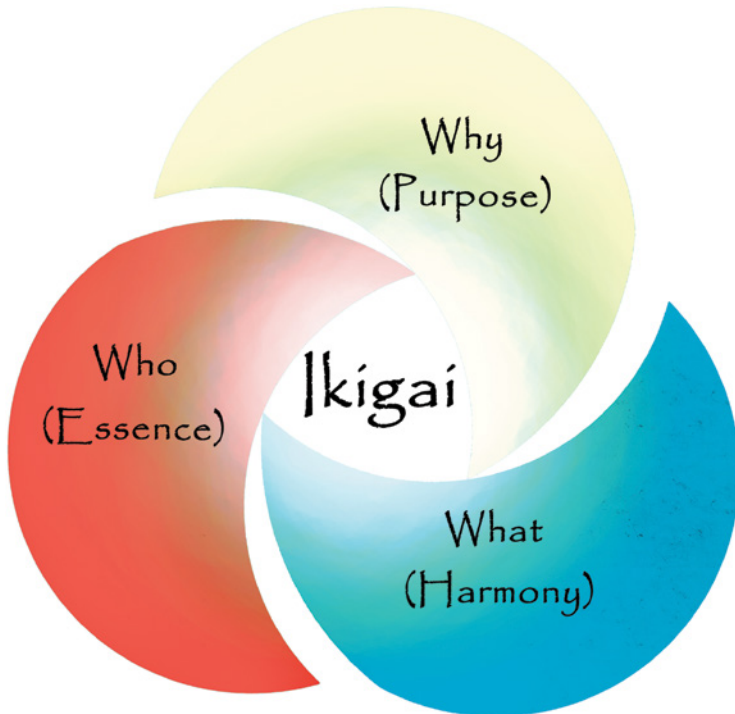


Figure 1.1 The Ikigai Nexus.

The original Latin meaning of *nexus*—“that which ties or binds together”—perfectly describes the connection and interdependence of Ikigai’s elements. This framework maps out those interconnected elements, each influencing and reinforcing the others. When we express our essence and purpose harmoniously in everything we do we are experiencing our Ikigai—in our careers, our relationships, and our daily lives.

The Language of Default

There is a default language in life. The language of default is filled with *shoulds* and *have tos* and *ought tos* and *musts*.

default (n. & v.)

1. (v.) *To deceive, to cheat; to put wrong, to lead astray, cause to be mistaken; be concealed from.*
2. (n.) *A state of privation or deprivation in which things that are essential for human well-being are scarce or lacking.*³

When have you felt like your life and gifts were wasting away, misused, or consumed? That is the default, a language of disintegration and burnout. We are as the definition clearly shows, deceived, cheated, and led astray by following the well-worn way of default.

It is the use of this language that eventually covers up our Ikigai. The life we were meant to live, the one we were created for is obscured from view and what is left is a state of deprivation, scarcity, and lack. Somewhere along the way . . . we just began shutting down parts of ourselves to be able to function in this default space. The journey to Ikigai begins when we leave the default way and embrace the language and life of purpose.

When have you felt integrated, sound, whole, and complete? That is the language of purpose. The language of purpose breathes life back into us. It helps us uncover those hidden parts of ourselves long ago forgotten.

Let’s look at the opposite, the antonyms of default:

- abundance
- plenty
- enough

- respect
- strength
- sufficiency
- satisfaction
- fulfillment

When we live from a point of purpose the whole world of possibilities open up for us. The life we were meant to live is revealed. There has never been a more disruptive time for careers. Between the changes brought on by the pandemic to the rupture of traditional models for careers, roughly three-quarters of people report experiencing burnout at work in the past year alone.

The majority of people over 50 (56%) will have their careers ended prematurely and nearly 90% of those will never make that level of salary again.⁴ Younger people especially want meaning and purpose in their work. They also expect the companies they work for to have a defined purpose greater than making money. Yet every day we read about companies that have prioritized profits after promising employees and customers the sun, moon, and the stars.

Even companies with more than a century of commitment to their people are breaking their social contracts and kicking them to the curb with layoffs. Jobs come and go; who we become along the way is what lasts.

Two Halves of Life

Carl Jung popularized the idea of two halves to life. His thought being that the first half was about building the ego self—our careers, our identity, status, that sort of thing. This is what I call the default life, and it is driven by the language and expectations of the default. The *shoulds* and *have tos* and *ought tos* we are given from a young age.

Jung's perspective for a second half entailed either enlightenment or depression. Continuing the default path ultimately leads to disappointment and burnout. The second half of life can and should be focused and driven by the language of purpose rather than continuing the default.

How often were we advised to study hard and get good grades to obtain a good job? Keep moving up the ladder, build a career, and