

## The Case for Mediocrity

By Jamie Ducharme, *TIME Magazine* (abridged), September 18, 2023

[...] Embracing mediocrity goes against everything Americans are taught to believe. Hard work has been valued throughout U.S. history, dating back to the Puritans who built New England on the belief that labor was inextricably linked with salvation. The idea that anyone can succeed with enough hard work forms the backbone of the “American Dream,” a phrase popularized in the 1930s. The concept of the American Dream has evolved over time—until the mid-1900s, the phrase was associated not with material wealth but with furthering the common good [...].

To pursue that prosperity in a deeply capitalist society, anyone not born into immense wealth has to work for it. So it’s perhaps no surprise that U.S. culture lionizes hard work and looks down on leisure, that we’re raised to earn and do and achieve as much as we can, to shoot for the moon and settle for landing among the stars. [...]

For a long time, I bought into that mindset. I was the straight-A high school student, the summa cum laude college graduate, the magazine intern happy to give up my personal time to write articles for free if it meant advancing my nascent career. It was only once I achieved the big thing and watched it tank my mental health that I realized what this mindset had cost not just me, but also others who subscribe to it. As of 2023, more than three-quarters of U.S. adults report feeling stressed at work, almost 60% experience elements of burnout, and almost 20% feel they work in a “toxic” environment, according to the American Psychological Association. [...]

Some companies have responded to these warnings with anti-burnout programs and extra vacation time. But the solution, as I see it, requires a broader rejection of the ceaseless pursuit of greatness that often leaves our health and happiness in its wake. [...]

But giving it all up isn’t so simple, as scholar Avram Alpert learned when he wrote his recent book, *The Good-Enough Life*, which explores how the pursuit of greatness harms individuals, communities, and

society at large. Initially, Alpert says, he wanted to focus on how learning to be pleased with “good” instead of “great” might affect individuals’ happiness and well-being. But it felt impossible to say with a straight face that people should “chill out and be good enough” in the face of huge societal barriers like wealth inequality, racism, and sexism.

[...]

Checking out of the greatness grind often requires a safety net that millions of Americans living paycheck to paycheck or in poverty simply don’t have. It is one thing to tell someone who is already financially comfortable that money can’t buy happiness. But what about someone struggling to pay the rent or put food on the table? How could anyone tell them to be content with less?

“We shouldn’t have layers of society where people have to work that hard and live in those dire conditions,” Alpert says. But since we do, choosing mediocrity is perhaps the greatest privilege of all—and one that historically has available only to white people, says Michael Harriot, author of *Black AF History: The Un-Whitewashed Story of America*.

“A Black person has to work twice as hard as a white person to get half as far,” Harriot says. That means choosing to be average often isn’t an option for people of color, just as it isn’t for others who have to swim against the current of discrimination every day, including those who are not able-bodied, cisgender, or heterosexual.

[...] Individuals can’t fight against centuries of systemic oppression on their own. [...]