THE TYRANNY OF CAREERS

and the Joy of Work

Ethan Crane

Introduction

Thinking back to the kind of careers advice I received at school and university – the kind that is still received in schools and colleges everywhere – it seems incredible that I trusted this advice at all. I may not have had a high opinion of the teacher offering the advice – generally a bored individual who repeated by rote the same information to student after student, and who appeared anything but enamoured of their own career choice – but I certainly took on board the subtext of what I was told: work hard to pass exams, in order to go to university, to get a good degree that provides you with a more prestigious career. I drank in the automatic conclusion that a more prestigious career meant work that I enjoyed, that I loved to do – and that such work would make me happy. Full-time paid work in my chosen profession would be the foundation of a fulfilled life of self-esteem.

But my trust of traditional careers advice was not simple naiveté. There was no other advice to trust. There were no alternative suggestions, and these were unlikely, since the teachers and university leavers offering the advice had traditional careers themselves. Everything suggested that without full-time employment, without 'a career', you had somehow failed, because paid work was of the highest

importance – an idea symbolised in the instinct when meeting a new acquaintance to ask, 'so what do you do?', meaning, 'what paid work do you do?'. Even without such careers advice I would have wanted a full-time career. This was what all adults did, or at least all the adults I knew as a teenager.

Even when I tried to find a career in work that I loved, and fulfilment and self-esteem were not forthcoming, still I did not consider the careers advice faulty. In my twenties I had career jobs in television, film and publishing, where I thought there a greater chance of enjoying the work, as these industries sent products into the world that I admired and personally valued. But when these careers were not fulfilling I did not blame careers themselves – I simply thought I had not yet found the right one.

But this was not the reason. Because although I loved to tell other people I worked in television or film or publishing, the reality was that it was little better than any other job. In any career, regardless of the actual tasks involved, it is the work culture – the work environment, the relations between staff, the organising principles, the amount of work – that affects the possibilities of fulfilment more than anything else. All of my careers, however prestigious, suffered the same problems: boredom, frustration, and lack of control of my life outside work.

I was not the only one disappointed: many of my friends with other great careers seemed even more disappointed. The doctors and teachers with socially-rewarding work appeared to have forgotten the promise of fulfilment just as quickly, in professions where the reward was supposedly built in. They rarely spoke of reward – when they did mention their work it was to bemoan the stress, organisational problems or idiotic managers. Our careers were sometimes exciting in theory, if we considered them at times when not actually doing the work. But they did not make us thrilled to get up in the morning.

If my peers and I had forgotten the promise of careers advice, had forgotten the reason we worked so hard to find this disappointing career job in the first place, then the fact that our paid work dominated and controlled our lives had a more serious consequence: if there was little fulfilment and self-esteem forthcoming, there was also no time left to search for it anywhere else. Our careers, and recovering from our careers, took up all of our time.

It was only in my thirties that I began to understand that any career, any job that involved full-time work for someone else could never be fulfilling. Full-time work for someone else always came with certain features that meant fulfilment and self-esteem were unlikely – whatever the actual work involved. This led me to the idea that if the prestige

of a career made no difference to fulfilment from the work, then why bother competing for the prestigious career in the first place? I would be better off earning money in work that left me time for other areas of life that did fulfil me. The 'good' careers are so all-encompassing they leave little room for all the small actions that contribute to your own well-being, and to a healthy society: keeping up with family and friends, playing a part in your community, and most of all doing work of your own (probably unpaid), of whatever kind, that is valuable to you.

Because work *is* the source of joy, of a fulfilled life – as long as this work allows for innovation, and is work that you yourself genuinely value. This book is for anyone who desires to do this kind of work, who wants to spend a portion of their week engaging their brain in a manner that does not feel wasted, for the joy of it, and not just to make a living. It is partly a memoir of why my careers were so unfulfilling, my experience of how work culture makes innovative work within companies so difficult. And it is partly my solution to this problem. I found my working life needed to consist of two different types of work: unpaid fulfilling work devised from my own ideas and interests; and then the less important work, for money, which I needed in order to survive. The combination of these two types of work leads to what I think of as a self-made career, which balances the needs of both – but always treats

the fulfilling work as the most important.

As with all advice, this is simply what worked for me. Not everyone desires innovative work of their own to find fulfilment – some people crave a career working for someone else for the structure it gives their life. But it took me a long time to realise what I had given up for this structure. And I think there are a lot of other people out there who think like me, people with ideas and ambitions who took on full-time careers without any real knowledge of the bargain they struck, and who wonder what happened to their lives. A self-made career could work for many people, people who deep down know there is other work they would rather do. When I look at the lives of the adults I know, the ones who appear happiest, who have the most self-esteem, it is very rarely the people with high-pressure full-time jobs, whatever profession they work in. It is the people with self-made careers, where at least a proportion of their week is set aside for innovative work, which is more important than the work they do for money, who seem happiest.

This alternative advice feels even more relevant now as more and more school-leavers are under pressure to go to university, to mire themselves in five-figure debt in order to secure one of these traditional careers. University is not essential for many self-made careers. And the important lessons learnt there – about confidence, self-reliance,

sociability and so on – can be found elsewhere at a fraction of the price. Desperately applying for an elusive graduate career job straight from university is not part of a self-made career.

The urge to write this book was the urge to go back in time and hand it to my younger self, just graduated from university and hopelessly oblivious to the realities of a traditional career. I hope it goes some way to granting permission – to emphasising that <u>you do not need permission</u> – to people like my younger self, to encourage them to go ahead and focus on the work they are truly interested in. Not for money, but because it is valuable to you in other ways. Perhaps it applies mostly to graduates, because graduates are at the sharp end of this argument: the most educated, and so with the greatest expectation of fulfilment from a career. To those told at school they are clever enough to be doctors, or lawyers or engineers or whatever, but who have their doubts whether *being* this thing, a doctor or lawyer, is really what they want for their life. But joy from work is not limited to graduates at all. Even though it is certainly dependent upon learning, this does not necessarily mean learning in formal education. Nor is it dependent on academic ability, the ability to pass exams. But I hope it is also useful to people who find themselves stuck in an unfulfilling career, at whatever age, to emphasise that the same permission still

applies.

Traditional careers advice is right about one thing: work is the source of fulfilment and self-esteem. But it must be innovative work, and work that is valuable to you, from your ideas. It may (or may not) be rewarded by money, but this is not why you started it. When you have a proportion of each week set aside for work that you value, be it paid or not, how you earn money to support yourself becomes much less important. This is the life of the happiest people I know.

Contents

1. No Value, No Innovation

To the young graduate who has just secured their first career job – after months or maybe even years of trying – I must appear a deluded idiot. There you are, with a signed contract that grants you access to a shiny building, where you are asked to perform intellectually-challenging tasks in collaboration with other adults. Where in return you receive a salary each month, more money than you have been paid for any previous job. When you begin your first career, the idea that it is a tyranny over your life is far from your mind. On the contrary, you almost certainly feel fabulous.

This is how I felt when, eighteen months after leaving university I landed a job at a London television channel. It was my first job with reasonable pay, and the work required of me was interesting, certainly in comparison to the other temporary jobs I had done in the past. And what of the conditions I worked in? This was not a cold warehouse or a sweltering kitchen: this was a warm office environment, with my own desk and computer, and endless supplies of free tea and coffee. The people with whom I worked were on the whole very friendly, and even though I was the most junior employee I had a fair amount of autonomy, in that I decided how I scheduled my work, and made decisions about how the work was done. Even if this was not yet work that I loved and valued there seemed the possibility of advancement closer to

work that was truly fulfilling. Maybe I would end up making television programmes! And besides, the fact that someone trusted me to perform my tasks was, in itself, a type of fulfilment. Compared to the exhausting and monotonous labour of my relatively close ancestors, this was heaven.

Indeed it appeared that my first career job might actually fulfil the promises of traditional careers advice. And no one, but no one, was offering anything other than congratulations for my obtaining my first proper, salaried job. In my and everyone else's eyes, I was a success.

It was only after a few months that I stopped to consider what this job had done for me. Firstly, I may have loved some of the programmes made by the channel – but I was not making those programmes. I was predicting the audience ratings for each programme, predicting how many people, and more importantly what demographic of people, might watch them, in order that the sales team could sell the advertising slots in between. I had told myself, as well as my friends and family, that I had the glamorous position of working in television – and most people knew no more than that, had no idea what I actually did there.

In addition this career had fixed my life into a rigid structure. I was now used to the idea that I worked five days a week and rested at weekends. My social life had, in part, become entangled with the social

lives of my work colleagues. But although I never consciously thought about the promise of that traditional careers advice, that promise of self-esteem, it was a vague, unspoken thought in my subconscious. What exactly *was* this job I was doing? Providing data via a computer that a sales team used to extract a better price from their advertisers. Was this 'work that I loved'? The work was in part about statistics, and I had a degree in maths. But did this mean I loved the work? A more generous view of my day-to-day tasks may have said that I helped the sales team make more money for the company, which contributed towards making more television programmes. But I did not feel like I was making any contribution to high-quality programme making, however many speeches from the managing director tried to make me feel that way. Besides, I only liked some of the programmes the channel broadcast – most I did not value at all.

Once the initial glamour of the job faded – the Friday drinks, the occasional lunches on my boss' company credit card, the adjustable executive chairs – it was not at all clear of the source of this self-esteem from work. Perhaps, I thought, I had mistakenly jumped into the first job I found, and this was not a job that I loved after all. But I could always find another job. What did a job that I loved really look like?

Traditional careers advice implies that 'work that you love' is the same as 'work whose day-to-day tasks require the skills for which you have an aptitude'. Society had a method to identify my abilities – as I progressed through education I narrowed down the subjects I studied, until I was left with just maths at university, my most proficient skill. All that was left to do in order to be happy was find a job that made use of my mathematical abilities.

I am exaggerating, of course. But although it is an exaggeration to say that school's only purpose is to identify our most proficient talent, so that we can use it in a career, it is not much of one. And it highlights the main problem of traditional careers advice, because the interpretation of 'work that you love' is so much more than 'work for which you have an aptitude'.

This is not to say that you do not find fulfilment if you pursue work that uses an identified talent. A computer programmer enjoys the efficiency of their code, an English student the elegance of their prose, a zoology student the opportunity to work with animals. But just as important to whether you 'love the work', to whether it fulfils you, is the purpose of the work, and the process by which you create it.

My identified talent was maths, and I found a job that used maths to analyse television viewing statistics. Did this analysis make me happy?

No. I was not using my love of maths in my work, I was crunching statistics (I never even liked the statistical side of maths), and I was doing so to help broadcast television programmes, most of which I thought worthless.

It is the same for the vast majority of other professions. A computer programmer may take pleasure in the efficiency of their code, but that coding is to display the products for an online supermarket. An English student may take pleasure in the succinctness of their copy in their public relations job, but that copy is to promote the benefits of a new anti-depressant for a pharmaceutical company. A mathematician may take pleasure in their ingenious algorithm for buying investment futures in the City, but they have perhaps just contributed in their own small way to further instability in the global financial markets.

'I saw the best minds of my generation... writing spam filters.'
writer Neil Stephenson

Traditional careers advice does not consider the purpose of your work as important in whether or not you might love it. Or at least it fails to acknowledge that out of all the careers you might follow, very few involve end results that you personally value. There are some careers that produce products and services that people personally value:

filmmakers, book designers, website coders, and so on (more on these in chapter 2), and there is a category of socially-rewarding careers: doctors, teachers, charity workers, and so on (more on these in chapter 3). But of the vast majority of other careers, although labelled good by society, it is difficult to see how you personally value the end result of the work: lawyers, insurance brokers, accountants, salespeople, bankers, computer programmers (this is not an exhaustive list in case anybody thinks I am singling out these professions).

Of what exactly are you proud if you are a brand manager for a pharmaceutical company, or if you balance the accounts for a multinational corporation? If you devise a new mobile phone contract, programme the software for an insurance website, or accurately predict the ratings for a television channel? If any value is felt from this kind of job it is not in the actual work done, but in the importance you feel by possessing such a career – the value is about status, and is nothing at all about the intellectual value of the work, or the value of the work to the world at large.

I was oblivious to this fact: that genuine fulfilment from my career was only possible if I knew the work had brought something good into the world, if the work itself was valuable to me. When asked if I enjoyed my job at the television channel, I rarely told the truth, that in fact I felt

somewhat ashamed to work within the advertising sales team, that the job brought me little self-esteem. Besides, it did bring me *some* self-esteem: I worked for a television channel rather than as a shelf-stacker in a supermarket. I greatly valued my work when I told people I worked in television – just not when I was actually at work. What I valued was the social status of my job, rather than fulfilment from the task involved. But status in a job with no genuine value is a sickly kind of self-esteem – one that seeks happiness through being envied by others. And one that can keep you in work for all your waking hours performing tasks that mean nothing to you.

Traditional careers advice is not wrong. If you pursue work that you love, because you think it is genuinely valuable, then fulfilment and self-esteem will follow. But I did not find genuine value in my careers: where my employer determined my goals and tasks, and the speed at which I fulfilled them, towards an end result that I did not personally value.

What I lacked – what I can now see that I lacked, though this was not at all clear at the time – was the opportunity to innovate. And to innovate in work that I truly felt important, rather than tasks handed down to me. You could say I was innovating when asked in my television job to create something new, but this is not the kind

of innovation that provides genuine fulfilment. For genuine fulfilment from innovation, the original idea must both come from you, from your desire to see this thing in the world, in order that you personally value the effects of the work, and must be moulded by you in order that it is completed in a manner you still value. In a traditional career your new idea does not originate from your desires, nor is it moulded and approved by you – it must be passed around for approval, and is almost certainly changed by others. And because you are part of a company, your new piece of software, your more efficient method of predicting ratings, or your new management structure is subsumed into the overall running of the company in a manner that is barely visible. And more importantly, valueless to yourself. You may be congratulated by your boss, you may be paid a bonus – but you don't feel fulfilment from the innovation.

Throughout the history of mankind improvements in our well-being have been made by innovators, who start their own small businesses because they saw a niche they could fill with their own particular skill. And this still goes on today, with innovators creating internet start-ups, with modern day cottage industries, turning the work they love into a living. (Problems confront us when we turn the work we truly love into a living, but the work itself can still be genuinely innovative

work.) True innovation happens when there is an open canvas in the development of a new idea, and if the idea is yours. But this does not happen in a traditional career for a large company. The founder of the company may have felt the pleasure of innovation when they started the company, there may have been innovation on the part of the first few people whom they employed. But the people employed later, once the company becomes bigger, enter a work culture where there is little opportunity for innovation. First of all the corporate employee is almost certainly employed in tasks that lead to niche goals they would not choose themselves, tasks for which they have little desire to innovate. But more damaging to an employee's desire to innovate than this is that they are part of a company system, a structure that requires management and routine in order to work.

Large companies are the graveyard of innovation for the vast majority of people who work there. CEOs may cry out about their need for creative, innovative individuals, but a company's need for process, structure and efficiency trumps innovation every time. Genuine innovation and creativity, the kind that provides fulfilment and self-esteem, needs time, freedom, the chance to make mistakes, and most importantly to be based upon your own values. The opportunities for this in a traditional career are close to zero.

'The reality is the best people who have great ideas in science don't want to work for a big company – if you want to work with the best people, you're going to have to go outside your own company.'
Chris Viebacher, CEO of healthcare company Sanofi

To innovate, to feel the pleasure of innovation, you need to decide the goals and process of the work yourself. If you are someone who has this urge, this means you will have to decide upon the nature of this innovative work for yourself, without pay (at least at the start). Innovative work does not feel like a job, like work you do for an employer. It is work that you would do anyway, even if you were not being paid. And not just work traditionally thought of as art – it is work that is creative, but not necessarily music or painting or writing or anything else commonly labelled creative. It is simply a goal for which you originated the idea. But if worked at with discipline and intent it is a genuine source of self-esteem and happiness.

You may read this and think, 'I have no idea of the nature of my innovative work'. This is not a problem – the discovery can take time. Many people have no idea, and think they never will. I had little idea until I was in my thirties. Later chapters detail this floundering search, in the hope that it may reduce this floundering time for others.

There is one place where the answer will not be found: in a full-time

career where you work for someone else, at tasks that you did not define, towards goals that you do not personally value.

'Draw the art you want to see, start the business you want to run, play the music you want to hear, write the books you want to read, build the products you want to use – do the work you want to see done.'
writer Austin Kleon

2. Creative Careers are Not Creative

When I eventually left my job at the television company to travel and work abroad for a couple of years – envious of friends who had done the same, and who appeared to have much a more exciting experience even than 'working in television' – I had learnt at least one thing from my first career: that a job in the sales department of a creative industry is not a creative job. So when I returned to London to look once again for a full-time career I was keen to find a job that I imagined was genuinely creative. There may not have been creative roles in sales department of a television channel, but television had creative roles in other departments. The description of the profession told me so: it was one of the creative industries. This was where creative, fulfilling work must be found, in film, music, television, publishing and so on. Or so I thought.

This idea must have had some validity, for countless other twentysomethings had come to a similar conclusion, and sought the same jobs as myself. Their and my motivations appeared sound: I wanted to work on films, and I loved films. If I could manage to find work with a film company whose output I admired, that would be satisfying, wouldn't it?

But this was another mistaken interpretation, much the same as the idea that 'working in television' was about making television

programmes: just because a film company had produced films I personally valued, there was no guarantee that my work for them would actually *feel* like helping to produce a film. Or rather: to say you have worked on a film, that you did work where the end result was a film released in the cinema, says absolutely nothing of your experience of the process of that work, or how much fulfilment you felt as a result.

I wrote to a number of film companies, and got a break when a couple of weeks work experience in a film company office allowed me to corner a producer about to start shooting, and succeed in convincing her I could be production runner on her film. Now it looked like I was getting somewhere – I was moving towards actual creative work, on a film, actually on a film set!

The first few weeks were exciting – I helped set up a production office, I drove a production car around, I ran errands for the director. The work even felt creative in some ways, as there was much I had to organise myself, to make up on the spot – I never just sat in an office. But though I may have thought otherwise, I was not doing a creative job – the work was administrative. I created nothing of value myself. I was assigned tasks and I completed them, sometimes in a 'creative' manner, but never in a manner that I found fulfilling. The only fulfilment to be had was fulfilment of the task itself, in order to satisfy whoever had given it

to me.

And so it is for many, many jobs in the so-called creative industries: these are administrative positions, not creative ones. There are production runners, rights executives, scheduling executives, all manner of assistants, and countless other roles where you are not required to originate ideas. Or, you may be required to originate ideas, but they are ideas that serve somebody else's purpose. And this is not at all the same as creative work of your own, the kind that brings fulfilment and self-esteem.

Genuine creative work is, I think, what we unconsciously seek as our ultimate goal when we think 'I want to work in the media'. Unless we do so only for status, to rub up against famous people, so we can say 'I work in film'. Many of the people I met on the film had the ambition to end up in a genuinely creative role. I may have started my television job analysing viewer ratings, but I had the vague abstract hope that one day this might lead to directing my own programmes. The music industry personal assistant hopes that one day it might be her who chooses the next hot band to sign to their record label. And I thought that my production runner job might one day mean I directed my own films, that originated from my own ideas. This may have been naive – but I was surrounded by plenty of other naive people who imagined that their job

was the route to genuinely creative work. But the mythical creative roles were scarce, were many years down the line. There were countless layers in between and they were, for the large part, administrative roles.

That I was not actually creating anything in my production runner job did not bother me in the beginning. The work was exciting – I was high on the glamour of working in the film industry. But what quickly followed was the dark side that comes with any glamorous, highly-prized job: my cravenness to submit to overwork and mistreatment.

I was a completely willing victim. At the beginning of the production, before there was any real work to do, I worked an 8 hour day, 5 days a week. By the end of the film the whole crew worked 12 hour days, 6 days a week, and by that point I did not think it strange that no one else thought this strange. I was tired and stressed all the time, had no life outside of work, and the fatigue made me paranoid. I formed the idea that other members of the crew were hoarding the creative, joyful aspects of working on a film for themselves, and were keeping me, as a lowly production runner, away from it all. The crew were, after all, hiding the joy of their creative careers most expertly – behind masks of stress, anger and misery. One of the assistant directors hid his own pleasure behind drunken admissions on location of how much he missed his three young children. Why did we want to work in the film industry when

we had to work seventy-hour weeks? Was it that much fun? On the contrary, I was not having much fun at all – I was exhausted, I couldn't sleep properly for thinking about all the things I had to do the next day, and in addition worried because the tiredness meant I had repeated minor accidents in the film set car. There were occasional bouts of excitement, such as when we travelled to film on location – but always within the fatigue of twelve-hour days. And twelve-hour days are the norm in the film industry, because there are people willing to work them, people like me. If anyone is not willing or complains, there are hundreds of others happy to take their place, to fill that glamorous position.

But it was not just the long hours and having no time to see my friends that I was happy to put up with: I was also happy to be bullied and shouted at by more senior crew members, who had no doubt suffered their share of bullying and shouting in their more junior years. I was regularly screamed at by a stressed assistant director. Myself and a production assistant silently took the blame for a taxi being late to pick up an actor. Crew drinks in our location hotel included a game called, 'which crew member do you find most annoying?'. And all these, by-themselves-insignificant moments were instances in a general atmosphere of rigid hierarchy characterised by barking orders at people and blaming them when they didn't do the work quick enough. One day

I joked to the production manager that working on a film was a bit like being in the army – to which she replied, without a hint of humour, that it was exactly like being in the army.

I say this less to complain – although I do like to complain about such work culture – than to highlight the reality of working in an industry like film, or any glamorous, creative career: that the more glamorous the job, the closer you work with the famous or those who are actually doing creative work, the more willing you are to put up with overwork and abuse, in order to keep your glamorous job. The more people like myself are willing to put up with this behaviour, the worse it becomes. And we were willing, because we imagined we had found a career that we loved.

I only have my own experience to go on, of course. Perhaps the stress and prima donna behaviour and bullying were unusual on this one film. But it did not seem much of a stretch to imagine that these overworked senior crew members, in a profession that was 'like the army', with little social life outside of the film industry, routinely prevented from attending events such as weddings and funerals during shoots (one cameraman got quietly married on our one day off a week, presumably because he could not promise his wife-to-be that he would be able to attend his own wedding), who were constantly stressed by

demands from even more senior crew members, and so had developed a attitude of guarded suspicion that everyone was constantly plotting to make their life harder, were only going to behave like this on every film on which they worked.

Despite all this, anyone I have spoken to who has worked on a film said that the experience was 'great'. Sometimes, 'hard work, but great', but still great. I am as guilty of this as anyone. I love to tell people I once worked on a film – my status rises considerably. 'You're the type of guy who has the nous to get them themselves a job on a film', I hope to see them thinking. Why would I want to dampen this opinion with the follow-up line that the job was a bit, no, hang on, very rubbish?

What lesson did I learn from the fact that my quest for a fulfilling career – a successful quest in as much as I had found my dream job – had turned out to be nothing of the sort? I learnt nothing at all. For the miserable time I had working on the film, and for my inability to take pleasure and self-esteem from the work, I blamed the hierarchical structure of the film industry, the pandering to the demands of directors and actors, the sour character of some of the crew members. I did not blame careers, and the desire for them, in general. I still wanted a career somewhere else, and imagined that out there was some fulfilling job for which I could be paid a salary.

Whilst unemployed after the film, without a career and wondering what to do with myself, I tentatively began writing – to do work of my own. I say began when what I mean is I started again, because I'd enjoyed writing since I was young. But I failed to see this current writing as a continuation, because when young I had written for fun, and now I was writing in order to be published. Or so I hoped. Childhood writing was for the pleasure of writing, adult writing was for publication, prestige, with the ultimate goal to earn a living, to avoid working in a job I did not like.

Of course the writing did not go well. I wrote stuff, a few stories, tried to write a film script, but who was going to publish it or make it into a film? What I had written was not even finished properly. And even if I did finish it properly who the hell was going to pay me for it? Writing felt too much like hard work. Wasn't creative work supposed to be pleasurable? I discounted the few times when I did find pleasure – in the moments where it looked like an idea might make a good story, when elements were in place that meant I wrote a whole page without really thinking. But as soon as I looked back at these scraps that did not resemble anything publishable, the moments of pleasure were forgotten.

It was something of a relief when a lack of money meant I needed a

job again. Now I would no longer have time to fail to find pleasure from my own creative work. I found a temp job in the scanning department of a London book publishers, where I scanned photographs and artwork for the book cover designers. This was far from the frantic army-style film industry. The scanning work was boring, but the designers were friendly, and I was working at a book publishers. A company that publishes books! And I love books! Here, surely, were people who worked in a creative job where they genuinely valued the end result. Here cover designers spent their days dreaming up ideas for how best to illustrate the ideas contained in these books. Judging by the number of applicants for any vacant positions, the role of book cover designer was one the most coveted creative jobs going. Had I inadvertently stumbled upon people with genuinely fulfilling careers?

Yet the designers did not seem rapturous about their jobs. They did not bounce in early each morning before they were meant to start, eager to get to work – they slumped in early to ensure all their designs were finished on time. Their work was certainly creative – they created a design that previously did not exist – but any fulfilment from that work was suffocated by the pressure of deadlines, jarred by the constant interruption of emails, phone calls and meetings, and diminished by the criticism and tinkering of editors. Their creative work was not their

own – it was controlled by other people, and this made a big difference to the fulfilment they took from the work. What also differentiated such design work from genuine creative work was that for the majority of the time the designers created covers for books they did not value themselves. They may be happy with the cover they designed – but the existence of that book in the world, the content and ideas of the book, were rarely important to them.

What of the art directors, who were able to choose which covers they designed, and so whom you think might genuinely value their work? The hope of the junior worker in a creative career is that if they work hard, if they are given more responsibility, they will then have the chance to use their own creative ideas, to do innovative work that they truly value. But the art directors were actually in a worse position, since their working time was even more constrained. They did not spend their days 'dreaming up ideas'. Much of their time appeared to be spent in meetings, making snap decisions through economic considerations, decisions made according to the values of the company, which were to sell as many of their products as possible. Seniority did not allow them to feel more of the pleasure of creative work. Any value was much more due to glamour, to the status of their position as art director.

The problem appeared to be tied up in this word 'creative'. The

categorisation of the profession of designer or art director implies creativity, implies that the job consists of innovative work. But although something new is created, the culture that I observed, within which this creation took place, did not allow for fulfilment. The work culture sucked it away. Innovative work that does provide fulfilment requires time for thinking, time for making mistakes, time to forget the time. None of this is possible in a creative career working for someone else. Not unless you take the work home and innovate in your own time, for no extra money.

Perhaps you think my expectations are too high. That I am naive to expect a book publisher to allow its designers free rein over covers, that I should acknowledge that many people would be delighted to earn a living designing books. But this is not really my point – what is important is that the art students and design graduates who found these prestigious jobs rarely seemed delighted with their work. One graphic design graduate told me of the enormous difference there was between the encouragement he received from college tutors, to originate and think creatively, and the derivative, run-of-the-mill work demanded of him in his creative career, obliged as it was to follow fashion and marketing needs. After a few months, when the glamour of working on books subsides, a new designer appears to forget that they

once used to enjoy the creation of something from nothing, appears not to notice that the freedom to innovate that they had in college is almost entirely absent in their creative career. They settle into drawing a salary like any other careerist. And because they now have a demanding career, they have no spare time for genuinely creative work of their own, for using the innovative impulse that they cultivated at college. There is no spare time, or what there is does not leave enough mental energy for their own work.

The day-to-day reality of work in creative careers is hidden – in particular from those who have never previously had a career. A career in the media, in the creative industries is little different to any other, because the work cultures of all careers share similar characteristics: overwork, constant interruptions and little room for innovation. When the highly successful computer games company LucasArts closed in 2013 after 30 years, the former employees wrote eulogies to the company. Amongst the most enlightening were those that described how marriages failed, pregnancies were delayed and funerals missed because of the dedication to their work. These people missed their friends' weddings, changed their plans to have children, because of their dedication to their paid work? This is the nature of a 'great' creative career? How can this be a great career, with such a work

culture. More importantly, why go to such effort to land a highly-prized career when it is possible to find work fulfilment for yourself?

There was a more insidious consequence of my desire for a creative career, my desire to do work that aligned with my personal values. I thought that because I valued books and music and films these values, my tastes, could play a part in the work of this career. But they did not. They had no bearing on my work at all. I had not considered that I was extremely unlikely to ever work on books or films that I genuinely liked, that there was little chance for me to pick and choose the books or films on which I worked. My personal values were of no use in these creative industries, and no one was interested in my taste or values.

In fact in these industries you are required to *suppress* your personal values. I had to be enthusiastic about the making of a film which I thought was rubbish. The marketing executive in book publishing learns to declare all books they help publish as 'fantastic', regardless of their personal opinion. The publicity executive forces himself to 'like' the music of the boyband he must promote. To work for companies in this way, your values must become the company's values. You must forget your own opinions of the company's products, and later, if you stay for the length of a career, you must forget that you have forgotten, or else go mad.

The people who do genuinely creative work – the writers, directors, producers, actors, musicians who make the films or music that I value – none of them achieved their success by just taking a graduate job straight from university and working their way up. A director may end up working for a film company which assists them in their vision for their creative work. `But the actual creativity itself, the thinking, the sifting of ideas, the work of structuring these ideas into something that can be publicly presented – this process is not learnt and developed within a nine-to-five career. This creative process started in the creator's own time, as an essential part of their life, unconnected to the need for money, and will continue that way, even when they do earn money.

A job in a creative industry can still be a way to earn money – just do not expect the work to provide your life with fulfilment and self-esteem. And understand that the commitment that such jobs demand from your life, in ways that mean time for your own work is limited. Treat your own work as more important, and let other work, for money, take second place.

> 'Art suffers the moment other people start paying for it. The more
> you need the money, the more people will tell you what to do.
> The less control you will have. The more bullshit you will have to
> swallow. The less joy it will bring.' illustrator Hugh MacLeod

3. Rewarding Careers are Not Rewarding

My first career in the film industry was also my last. To my surprise I was offered a job on the producer's next film, despite my frequent fatigued-induced accidents in the production car. And despite my miserable experience on the film, the fact I had little time to see friends, and that I had not slept properly for the duration of the job and had forced myself to work when I was ill, still I found it a wrench to say no. I needed to earn money. And hadn't I loved to tell people that I was working on a *film*? Even a dreadful film that I would never watch again?

But I said no, and instead looked around at my other options, looked to the working lives of my friends for ideas, particularly those who had trained as teachers, and doctors, or who worked for charities, or any other career where they genuinely valued the end result of their work. I wondered if their idea of 'work that you love', of work that provided genuine fulfilment, was a better one. Because the end result of their work – educating a child, curing the sick, alleviating poverty – had results that appeared to match my friends' personal values, to match my friends' reasons for working in these professions. Their reasons had the same goals as the organisations for which they worked. Did these socially-rewarding professions not have their fulfilment built-in?

If my teacher and doctor friends were fulfilled by their careers they hid it well. There must have been some fulfilling moments of their

jobs – a doctor's satisfaction at preventing further sickness or death, a teacher's enjoyment when they saw a child grasp a new concept – but if these moments existed, they never discussed them. If teachers talked about their work at all it was to curse a new head teacher for creating more work through changes to the school's structure, or to lambast the government for new education policies that extended their responsibilities or restricted their teaching. Or they apologised that they could not socialise much in the week because they had marking to do. Often the doctors said nothing at all – because they were no longer able to socialise with the rest of us, due to the antisocial hours of their shifts.

But that was if friends in rewarding careers talked about their career at all. More likely was they tried to forget about their work, just as the rest of us did. Because although there was a worthwhile goal in their work, the moments when the work was truly rewarding were just that – moments. The rest of the time the rewards were swamped by the same problems of work culture: the pressure of deadlines, emails and phone calls, the lack of control of your time, the work politics, the impact of organisational restructuring. Not to the point where the doctors and teachers wished they worked in banking or butchery, because they still took some satisfaction from the status and respect that they deserved for the benefits they brought to society. But to me, as an outsider, the

stresses of their jobs always appeared to overshadow the fulfilment and self-esteem, that holy grail promised by traditional careers advice.

My conclusion was that if you want to be an inspiring teacher, or a cause-championing journalist, or work for a worthwhile charity, the worst way to go about this, the way that will best kill the love of this kind of work, is to apply for a job straight from university and pursue these ambitions as a full-time career. Because again the work culture of the full-time rewarding career allows little room for the development of innovative work, of the kind that benefits the world in the manner of your own choosing. The lessons a new teacher wants to teach are suffocated by the demands of keeping thirty-plus children in line and adhering to teaching guidelines. The well-intentioned rookie journalist is perhaps never sent to cover stories they think truly important. Vets do not spend all day petting animals.

I say the above as though I had this all mapped out at the time, as though these were my clearly-defined reasons for not re-training in one of these rewarding professions (I went as far as phoning up for the application pack for teacher training.) These were not the reasons – my decision-making process at the time involved little in the way of reason. My motives for not applying were in part due to not knowing how I might financially support myself, and even more due to not knowing

how I might fit teacher-training around the fun of being twentysomething in 90's London. Nowadays I count myself lucky to have escaped, when I can see what these rewarding careers have done to the lives of my friends. The psychological commitment demanded by a socially-worthwhile job makes the burden of this type of career in some ways worse than a non-rewarding profession. Those in rewarding professions take it upon themselves to put in more effort, more unpaid overtime, more mental energy – perhaps with the subconscious calculation that increased effort and commitment will mean an increased sense of reward and fulfilment. Or they do not have the luxury to take this upon themselves, these are just the realities of the job – a job that someone else is happy to take, rewarding as it is labelled, if you are not willing to put up with these conditions. So doctors sign a contract that commits them to work twelve-hour shifts at unsocial hours and, during training, to uproot their home life every few months to work at a different hospital. Teachers, despite a short school day, still work at least a forty-hour week, with most of these hours under stressful classroom conditions, after which they mark work and attend parents' evenings outside of their contracted hours. (I don't subscribe to the idea that the long holidays in teaching make it worth the heavy work commitment. If you're only in the job for the holidays, what happened to doing the job

for the sense of reward?).

None of this extra commitment would be a problem if the joys of rewarding work were forthcoming. But do any teachers and doctors that you know appear more enchanted by their careers than anyone else? On the contrary they endure this extra work because they feel a commendable commitment to schoolchildren or hospital patients, beyond the obligations of their work contract. But employers in rewarding professions take advantage of this additional commitment, and turn this willingness to care, this desire outside the bounds of an employment contract, into a source of free extra labour, into a purely business transaction. Not consciously – I am sure most managers wanted to work in health or education for the same reasons, with the same expectations of reward. The exploitation happens in two directions: market forces allow employers to do so, since there is a large pool of workers eager for a socially-rewarding career. And the careerist allows themselves to be exploited, because at some level there is a reckoning that their job ought to be hard, because they are allowed to care, as part of their work. Are being *paid* to care. They rightly view their profession as more than a contractual obligation, not just for earning a salary, but also for improving society. But the employer sees their side of the bargain as nothing more than a contractual obligation.

None of this is apparent to the young graduate as they search for their first job. The work culture of careers is unfathomable from the outside. Traditional careers advice only advises on how to find your way into a career – it says nothing about the work culture, the details of what happens once you get there.

One of the great difficulties of earning money to live (perhaps of living in general) is our human inability to recognise when we have made a bad choice. Whenever I found myself in a job or situation that was detrimental to me, was less than I hoped, was very far from work that I loved, I was generally the last to know. All through my job on the film set I found it easier to explain away my choice of career, to construct reasons why this was, in fact, what I wanted to do. I explained away my misery by telling myself that a film must be organised this way, that the film's importance as part of culture meant it was permissible, it was necessary, that people behaved in an abusive and stressful manner. That I was lucky to have such a great job. And the fail-safe excuse, kept in reserve, was: well, I have to earn money somehow, don't I?

Because when the conditions are stressful and unexpected, we often stay in these careers, these careers we blindly chose as naive young adults. Some of the teachers I knew left the profession, demoralised with the reality, but many stayed. Part of the reason is the

same as why anyone stays in a career: we need the money, and our current job is the most sure-fire way of earning it. If you have invested thousands of pounds of student loans and years of your life to train as a doctor or teacher, the best opportunity for paying back these debts is a career in that profession, irrespective of the working conditions. It is hard to throw it all away and start again at the bottom in another profession on no doubt lower wages. And then, even if you stayed in this now-disliked profession only so long as it took to pay back the debt, will you, after five or perhaps ten years, chuck it all in and start at the bottom again somewhere else? It is unlikely.

> 'We can so easily slip back from what we have struggled to attain, abruptly, into a life we never wanted.'
> Rainer Maria Rilke

For people in rewarding careers there is another reason to continue: embarrassment. For some time before you start and all the time during training, you are proud to tell others of your chosen career. Teacher or doctor sounds much more impressive and interesting than insurance salesman. The one occasion when I see people feel genuine self-esteem from their rewarding job is when asked, 'what do you do?'. At that moment they are sincerely proud of their career choice. But, as for

myself in my film job, not when they are actually doing the work.

Because how does it feel to tell those same people that you gave up that career, when earlier you were so proud of the profession you chose? It was this pride that had me almost agree to work on another film. One doctor I know stayed in his career for nine years before he quit: he said he had never enjoyed a single day of his working life, but kept thinking, all through the years of 36-hour shifts on call and a ruined social life, at some point his working life would improve. It never did, but this took nine years for him to realise. An art teacher told me that in her twelve years of teaching, before she quit, she could count perhaps five students for whom she felt she had made a difference, with whom she genuinely felt the pleasure of teaching. Is this enough to justify all your hopes for fulfilment from such a career?

This is not how it is for everyone. But in my experience people who derive genuine fulfilment and reward from their rewarding career, for whom it is worth handing over their life and mental energy to their paid work, are the exception, not the norm. Frustration, stress and fatigue are the norm – a reality, as with creative careers, that is invisible to graduates entering these professions. We make great efforts to convince ourselves that our life choices have been good, and in the case of careers extracting ourselves is made more difficult through

pride and financial constraints.

This pride has a hold over us for one main reason – we are conditioned to think that paid work is life's main source of pride, of self-esteem. We equate the social status of a career with the value of the work itself, when these are two different values that work against each other. Change this conditioning and we can easily quit.

I have to remind myself of the reason why I am so critical of socially-rewarding careers – of why I appear to harangue those who choose to become doctors or teachers or charity workers. Let me apologise for anything I say that looks like criticism of the choice to follow a socially-beneficial career, because these are admirable jobs to do, and vital to society. And I know that some people do feel fulfilment and self-esteem from full-time careers in these professions. But this book is not directed at them. It is directed at all those whose expectations of fulfilment have been failed in this type of job, to act as a warning to graduates who consider such a career. Because, like me, you might follow the advice to 'find a job that you love' and end up miserable and entrenched in a profession that you once admired at a distance.

If you want to be a doctor or a teacher or to do any socially-worthwhile job, do so – just do not expect it to be your life's fulfilment. Fulfilment is much more likely found outside of a career, in work you

have originated yourself. This work of your own can itself be useful to society, and useful in exactly the way you want it to, not bound by an employer's demands and all the compromises that entails. Your own work may even be in the same field as your paid work – but if it is not (at least in the beginning) part of a contract for money, if it is truly yours, from your ideas, this is the work that will bring you self-esteem.

My desire for a career – any career – was, at root, about control. I thought challenging work and a full-time salary were the means to take control of my life. But I was wrong – I did not control my life. My career controlled my life.

4. No Control

During my early attempts to have a traditional career there was, of course, one urgent motivation that trumped any vague ideas about fulfilment or self-esteem. A career paid a salary, and a salary granted me control of my life and the independence I craved. A salary allowed me to live where and with whom I wanted, and the power to purchase many things I desired – and at this time purchasing power was what I needed to feel self-esteem and dignity. With the backing of a full-time salary I could be myself, and pursue whatever ambitions I chose. So long as I spent thirty-seven or more of my daylight hours each week performing the tasks that earned me this salary.

I had a good social life – my salary gave me control in that regard. But this was the only aspect of my life I controlled: the ability to entertain myself, the ability to treat myself for the pain of working in a full-time career. This was a pain I imagined might someday fall away, if I found promotion in my career, and so moved on to more interesting, more fulfilling work. Or this is what I might have imagined, had I thought about it at all. But along with my peers I was too busy spending my salary on entertaining myself. A correlation developed between the demands of my career and how much I entertained myself, how much I spent on entertaining myself: the more my career asked of me, the more I wanted to demonstrate my financial ability to determine how I lived.

I was a spectator who was easily bored, rather than a participant who knew how to delight myself. I thought I was in control of my life, but I was anything but: my career controlled my time, my dignity, my ambitions, and my morals, and I was oblivious to it all.

My careers controlled my time even more than when I was at school. I gave them eight or more hours of each day when actually at work, and then I gave more: the time spent travelling to and from the workplace, plus deductions from my social life in the evenings when I was too tired to do anything but go home. When I went out in the week with friends I chose socialising or entertainment because other options were closed off through mental fatigue: the option to do innovative work of my own, for example. I had mental energy for little other than drinking, or television, or other spectator activities – freedom was the freedom to relax, to recover from work.

Nor did I have control of my time in work. Even if I had valued the work I did, taking fulfilment from it was difficult because there were always deadlines to be met. Whilst I worked on one piece of work other pieces piled up somewhere else, niggled at my attention and prevented the possibility of enjoying the task in hand. Aspects of all my jobs could have been interesting, had there been spare hours to analyse the tasks, or to create my own, better working methods. But there was no time for

this, no *spare* time. Spare time is never available in a traditional career. To admit you have spare time is a sin, to sit and just think about your work an act of indolence. Yes, I was granted the freedom and autonomy to decide how I organised my work day, this was no factory production line – but I had no control over how *much* work I needed to squeeze into that day, no time to take fulfilment in any one task.

Truly fulfilling work, I discovered later, requires an unspecified length of time, time to make mistakes, to learn from these mistakes, to go back and do it better the next time. My employers wanted good work from me, but the culture of work did not allow me the time to make sure it was good. Or rather, my employers were happy for me to spend extra time on a particular task to make it better, but not at the expense of other work – this had to be completed as well.

In addition, the promise of self-esteem in traditional careers advice had somehow been inverted. My careers made me feel the opposite of self-esteem, of dignity – instead I felt *un*dignified. It was not that I was treated badly, far from it – I was never whiplashed by a maniacal boss into working hard (apart from at times on the film set: the special case of highly-prized careers). I brought these time pressures upon myself, and everyone else did the same. At no point did I say to my boss, 'Actually, I'm already doing as much work as I can – I don't think I

can fit that in.' Instead I said, 'When do you need it by?'. I started each career with an understanding of a certain number of hours a week, a certain workload. But when the workload increased I had no leverage with which to object. I just did the work, and stayed late to complete it if I could not rush through it during the day. My only bargaining tool was the threat to leave. But I did not want to leave – I had a highly-prized job at a television company, or on a film!

My underlying fear, unspoken or even thought to myself at the time, was that any complaints about my workload might upset my boss, and so endanger my career. Or at least my career prospects. It is not clear to me now of what exactly I was afraid – what was my boss going to do, when it was true I had too much work? She could not sack me. Some bosses might even have commended me for good time management. But I did not complain, or rather I did complain, but only to my equivalent-level or more junior work colleagues, never to anyone who might have reduced my workload. No one complains, because to do so might damage the chances of promotion from this current position where they have too much work (to a new position where they have the same, or perhaps increased amounts of work). In feudal times, the principle was, 'Pay the poor just enough that they can buy the food they need in order to work, and they will continue working.' In the

modern career the principle is, 'Increase the employee's workload up to the point where they are off sick with stress, and they will continue working.' Not a deliberate principle, enacted by evil bosses. But one of unconscious collusion between the overworked boss and the overworked employee.

My dependence upon my career damaged my dignity even outside of the workplace. If I was delayed on my way to work, due to a cancelled train or other situation outside of my control, I worried that this was one more black mark of unreliability against me. Black marks which could mount up to – again, I had no idea what they mounted up to, or why I would be held responsible for London's traffic problems. Once mobile phones were commonplace, myself and other commuters around me were able to call to pacify bosses. My apologetic and exasperated tone served as a plea to my boss, to accept that this was a situation beyond my control, that I could not have foreseen. Which was of course the truth, but I needed to know, was desperate to know that my boss believed me. That I would not be *marked down* for this. (Ideally I wanted them to check a website for transport updates for confirmation of my excuse).

If I was ill, instead of resting at home to recover from the illness, I worried about the work I could not do, that it was piling up in

my absence. I worried that I was viewed as idle, simply because I happened to be ill. This reached a ridiculous height when, in the first few weeks of my job on the film set, I caught tonsillitis and continued to work for the next two days, before an inability to speak meant I had now reached the point where I was physically unable to do the job.

My pandering to (my expectations of) a boss' expectations was not unusual – the majority of my work colleagues acted just the same. The ones who regularly turned up late for work or called in sick were rare. The rest of us resented their easy-going attitude, their casual approach to their job. Much more common was the worry I overheard: when a career parent had a sick child, their first thought not for the child, but for whether their boss thought them less committed because they needed to be absent from work.

Why was I not prepared to give genuine reasons for the need to miss work, to speak to my boss adult-to-adult? Because, I think, even if your boss tells you to take all the time you need to get well, even if your boss is one of the nicest people you could meet, subconsciously you know you still cannot trust them, not in the way you trust a friend. With the nicest of bosses there is still a gulf of mistrust on both sides: I worried my boss might think me idle, my boss worried that she did not have staff whom respected her enough to be on time. Or maybe she

worried that her boss thought she lacked control over her department. Or maybe she did not worry at all. It made no difference to me – I was never going to know my boss' feelings on the subject of my lateness, and so I lost dignity in my craven need to be a good employee.

But I was right in one respect: a boss is not to be trusted. They might be entirely trustworthy in their everyday personal life, but however well-meaning they are in person, a boss' actions are always compromised by the need to keep their own job. If their job requires they make your working life harder, they will not agonise over your difficulties. They make light of your difficulties, helped by the fact that you take on the work without question. This is the role of a boss – if they agonise about the mental health of their employees all the time they will not be able to do their job. If they are forced to make redundancies they will not put your interests first. More likely, if they do make you redundant, they will avoid and never speak to you again out of embarrassment. I have seen this happen with the nicest of bosses.

We are shocked when this happens. When a boss behaves badly towards us, when we are made redundant or are expected to work harder, we are incredulous that they act in this way. But a boss has to, because they work for a company, because their behaviour is determined by the same motivation that makes us worry about the

impression we make at work: they want to hold onto their job.

This is part of the wider misconception we have about companies and institutions whom employ us: we expect them to look after us, we trust them to treat us well. But they can never be trusted. Not because the senior management are nasty or immoral, but because the simple, base-level, understandable motivations of senior management are that they want to keep their jobs, and that their jobs are not made harder by the demands of employees below them. Companies love to say that they look after their staff. But they cannot fulfil that promise, they are not structured in a way that allows them to fulfil such a promise. A company may look after you with parties and bonuses, but they cannot make promises where it really matters: the promise to make your career a fulfilling one, and the promise not to take away that career if they need to do so.

> 'We knew we could never trust a company that hires us, no matter how good, how proud it is at this moment, to stay loyal to us. To protect us. We will never put our faith in a corporation, even a good one. We can't. Because everything we know tells us that we will be disappointed.'
> famed CBS journalist Robert Krulwich

These undignified pressures, to not be late, or ill, to complete

too much work to a deadline, these I brought upon myself. But there were more subtle ways in which my employers further dented my dignity. Another demoralising strand to my lack of control was the companies' attempts to control my satisfaction from work – to insist that I was in fact feeling the fulfilment from work that was lacking. When the company was successful – that is, when the company made more profits than in some previous time period – I was meant to feel successful at the same time, was meant to feel proud of this achievement. The company reminded me to feel this way by holding celebratory drinks. But I had nothing to celebrate. In fact these celebrations made me feel a fool, because I had nothing to show for all the hard work that had caused this extra money to be made for the company and their shareholders.

This is not lamenting my lack of share in the profits – it is not saying that my fulfilment would have been satisfied by a bonus scheme. It is to say that the goal that I unconsciously sought, the fulfilment and self-esteem from work that are the subject of this book, are not at all bound up in the financial success of your company (or indeed in your own financial success). Increased profits say nothing about the work culture, or your experiences that brought about this company success. 'Come on,' companies chide, 'you must feel good about your work.

Look at how well we're doing!' But why would I feel good? What part of an increase in company profits means anything for an employee as regards fulfilment from work? This aspect of all my traditional careers, rather than filling me with self-esteem, instead filled me with something like shame. Perhaps not exactly shame, but irritation for allowing my fulfilment to be co-opted in this way. Because I did not feel fulfilled by the achievement of the companies' goals. When the television channel laid on employee drinks to celebrate increased quarterly sales figures I did not feel celebratory. At the wrap party for the film, I cared nothing for the quality of the final film (poor, as it turned out), only that the stressful work was now over. Instead I felt a certain stupidity for working hard at tasks which I did not really value. And ashamed that I allowed myself to join in celebrations for something I did not value.

There were other similar attempts at enforced satisfaction. The company hailed team-building days, recreational activities away from the workplace, as a way to make you feel part of the company 'family', to build stronger personal relationships with work colleagues. Which often succeeded, because it is pleasant to feel more connected to work colleagues, who may be friends outside of work as well. But again I felt manipulated, because a company's motive for team-building is not friendship – but to form stronger emotional bonds so that you feel

celebrated by your colleagues if you achieve, and that you have let them down if you do not: a slave driver's whip of emotional guilt. A company's desire for team-building is only to make you work harder. And the misuse of my friendships in this way was another boot in the face of dignity.

The lack of dignity in all my careers can be summed up in the idea that I was not able to *be myself*. I had to be a shadow self, acting the part of an employee who cared about their work for a greater reason than a paycheck at the end of the month. I wondered if the work personalities of my colleagues were also shadow selves – though of course I had no way of knowing, because I did not see their out-of work personalities. I did not know this at the time, but only later, when I worked for myself in a shared studio, alongside people whom were not work colleagues and so did not have to wear a shadow self, and only then did I realise how depressing this had been. To always be on guard, to suppress parts of your personality that did not fit the person the company wanted you to be.

At the time my twentysomething peers and I were, in the main, unbothered by any lack of dignity at work. We had not really listened to or taken in ideas about fulfilment in traditional careers advice, because we had no intention to stay in our early career jobs forever. After a bad

day at work we talked about what else we might do with our lives. We had ambitions, ambitions beyond our current career, sometimes in work of our own, in a self-made career. 'I'm going to to save up money and travel the world', we said. 'I'm going to do this for a few years, save some money and then become a PE teacher', said a university friend as he went off to work in the City. 'I'm going to do this for a few years and set up an adventure camp for teenagers in France', said another friend, as he started work as an energy trader.

Our ignorance of the realities of a career extended to what these careers did psychologically without us noticing. Our mindset slowly adjusted to that of the company, the corporation. We slipped easily into a lifestyle funded by the entirety of our salaries. We socialised with work colleagues in expensive bars and restaurants, because we were keen to be part of the team – was this not what we needed to do, if we were to keep our jobs which we needed in order to save that money?

But as the first months of our new careers turned into years, we did not notice that we had turned into different people. We wanted to be more adult, more worldly, but we became people who, as the years passed, thought less-and-less often about our long-term plans for travel or adventure camps. Or rather when we did think about these plans, they seemed less-and-less realistic as part of the life we now led. We

were not the same people as when we left university, and we used our changed situation as an excuse: 'I can't do X now because I have responsibilities.' A partner, later possibly children, were a reason to give up our ambitions. Our careers themselves became a reason.

The plans we had, the work we might have done for ourselves, this could have been a self-made career. The desire to be a PE teacher or run an adventure camp (both these friends still work in the City) is a desire to do work that helps others, and this is the nature of many of our youthful ambitions – to do something useful. Not always – but youthful ambitions often have a moral element, a desire to do something of value to society, a value sorely missing from the career we do instead. Because this is the worst aspect of a great many, perhaps the majority of careers: the control of your morals.

I do not mean that most careers involve work as morally corrupt as people trafficking or arms dealing. Instead that many careers require us to do work that not only is of no value to us, but is actually work that, at its heart, goes against our personal values. That in effect we are, in the words of Alain de Botton, misemployed: in work 'that fails to tackle with any real sincerity the true needs of other people, merely exciting them to unsatisfactory desires and pleasures instead'.

When I was honest about my job for the television channel,

predicting programme ratings for the advertising sales team, the primary effect of my work had little to do with the making of programmes: my work helped the sales team sell advertising space more efficiently. My career helped advertisers sell more of their products to the public, with only a secondary effect of helping make more television programmes (most of which I also did not value). The glamorous public face of my career was that I worked for television channel X – the underlying, unspoken reality was that I helped advertisers sell more stuff, that I helped advertisers exploit gullible people.

However much we want to believe otherwise, the ultimate aim of a great many careers is the same: to exploit gullible people. In sales, or marketing, or public relations, your exploitation of the gullible is more apparent: it is your job to make people buy your product or service when they would not otherwise do so, to persuade people to spend their money on your product regardless of whether it is suitable for their needs, or if their need even exists.

But even if your work does not exploit in such a direct manner, the main purpose of a great many careers is to support this exploitation in the background. A web designer who creates animations for a children's games website, is part of a process designed to coerce parents to pay for premium features. A copyright lawyer who protects the brand name

of a supermarket's washing powder is part of a process that coerces the public to buy more of their product than a competitor's, regardless of whether or not it is a better product. The aim of the work of a book cover designer is to create a cover that appeals to the greatest number of book buyers, regardless of the value of the book to you. If your job in any way supports, at the end of the process, a product that is sold – for mobile phones, or insurance, for anything – the goal of your work is to perform your particular task in order to help make more sales. Not to care about what pleasure of use your customer takes from the product or service, of whether the product adds value to the world.

Perhaps you think this is an exaggeration of the nature of work, a left-wing, rose-tinted view of how the world should operate. That exploitation of the gullible is 'only business', that this is the way that trade takes place, that it is the compromise that we make in order to earn a living, that it does not really matter. The ethics of trade are not the subject of this book. What matters to me here is that when my work had the end result of exploiting the gullible, I could not find fulfilment and self-esteem. To feel self-esteem from work about which you feel morally ambivalent or even morally abhorrent – that does not somehow happen just because you have reached your sales targets for the month.

This does not just apply to the stereotype of the corporate drone, who takes on and loudly sings the praises of their company, regardless of that company's effect on the world. Anyone who works for a company is affected, in ways that differ only by degree. Why would I really care about the colour reproduction of a book cover for the ghost-written autobiography of a former soap star? Or that the actress in a second-rate film was shown attention by buying her a bunch of flowers? The co-opting of my morals, along with the co-opting of my work satisfaction, was the biggest cause of despondency in all my careers, was the aspect of them that I needed to submerge most forcefully in order to continue to work in them.

Be proud to work for us, the company says. Celebrate in our sales success. But why would we want to? I never cared about the end product I helped produce (albeit obscurely), much as I tried to convince myself that was why I had wanted the job – and I helped to produce books and films, two of my favourite art forms. Why would I care, when I had played no part in deciding what was produced?

Eventually I realised that not only did my career work have no value to me, much of it had little value to society. Or at least little value to the kind of society that I valued – and it is this kind of value that is necessary for self-esteem. When you unpick the end result of a great

number of careers, do they really add any benefit to the kind of society you wish to see?

If you choose to avoid a traditional career and concentrate on work that you yourself value, you are often accused of selfishness, of 'not giving something back to society'. What this accusation really means is that you are not paying taxes from a career salary. But what if the work of your career does not 'give something back to society', because the effect of what it produces is negative? A contribution to society through taxes is cancelled out if you first coerce the gullible into buying stuff they do not need, and second earn money in this valueless career rather than in work that accords with your own moral values.

To other people we just work 'in television' or 'in law' or 'in web design'. We are good citizens because we contribute our tax money to the pot that pays for public services, we play our part in the economy of the country. We only consider the values of careers on the rare occasion when the work impacts upon our personal lives. A parent takes pride in the career of their marketing executive daughter, and only wonders about her work if by some random chance she happens to have organised the campaign that annoys them with unsolicited telephone calls. If it is someone else's parent annoyed by their daughter's work, their pride remains intact, and they pay no heed to the content of her
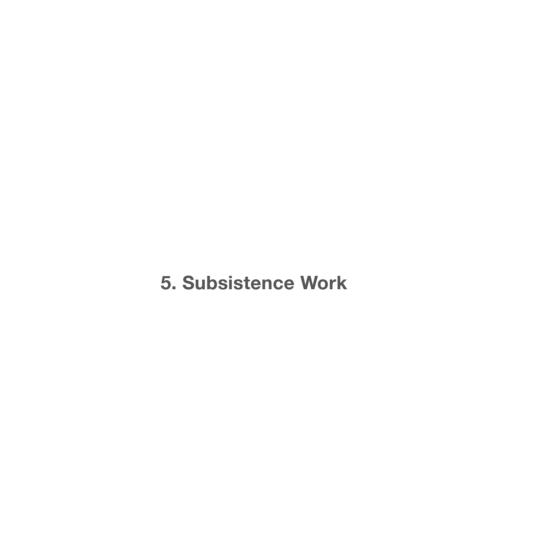
job.

We sons and daughters are deemed good citizens simply because we have a career. But I think the good-citizen mask hides the despondency a great many of us feel about our work, because our careers co-opt and control our morals, and exhaust us as we pursue this valueless work. Many people spend their whole lives in work that looks only to the primary moral of their company, to make money.

When I think about the famous people whom I admire, the reason I admire them is not for their money or fame – it is for their sovereignty, their control over their lives – control that is taken away by a traditional career. They decide when and how they do their work, every day, not just at the weekends, they are able to make decisions about the work they do based upon their own values. Before I started in adult work, one of the joys I looked forward to was wresting control of my life from my parents and teachers. But I immediately handed that control to my employers. And for some people this control is relinquished for the remainder of their working life.

Many of us cannot avoid earning money through work for companies – that we will be controlled by them is inevitable, at least to a degree. (I am compromised by corporations in the writing of this book – I have used a pseudonym as I worry that the various corporations for

whom I do freelance work will take offence.) But how much control we hand over is dependent upon our level of attachment to our paid work. If our attachment is unimportant, the fact that we do not value the work will not matter so much, and we will change jobs if the morals become too onerous. But we will not do this if we have put everything into this career, have made it the most important part of our lives. This is the danger when we prioritise our career over all other aspects of our lives.

Control over our work is already available to us – if we develop work that we value that is not primarily for money. Of course we need to earn money somehow, in order to live. But we should have no expectation of self-esteem from this paid work, from a traditional career. To find self-esteem from work you need to discover the work that is important to you, regardless of money, and organise your paid work to allow a proportion of your week to pursue it. Find your important work, and then work at it for the rest of your life.

5. Subsistence Work

No matter how little my careers lived up to expectations, I was not prepared to give up on the whole career idea. I still did not know exactly what I expected of my paid work. But what I did continue to expect was that paid work, the work I undertook for money in order to live, would always be my number one priority – that all other areas of my life, my choices of where I lived, of how much spare time I had, of how often I saw my friends and family were dependent on how I chose to earn money. Or rather: if at the time I did not expect paid work to be my number one priority – because I was not in the habit of listing the areas of my life in order of priority – I anyhow behaved as though this was the case. Because all other aspects of my life were dependent upon how I chose to earn a living.

In order to have a life that included innovative, fulfilling work, above all else I needed to unlearn this prioritising of paid work. The idea that paid work is what defines you as a person ('so what do you do?') had been planted in my brain at a young age, an idea that further told me that paid work equated with social status. The unlearning of such an all-pervasive idea was not an easy task. The priority of paid work is reinforced by perpetual news reports of graduates who cannot find a career, by parents worried that their children cannot find a job, by the existence in the world of so many people who appear to care about the

work they do, who profess the importance of their paid work. I was one of those people making up the numbers. Even if I did not want to care about paid work, my everyday actions were still those of someone who appeared to care. I had no desire to impress my boss, yet I worked like someone who wanted to impress his boss, because I thought this was necessary in order to receive my salary each month. And so I still acted (actions which translated themselves to thoughts) like someone who did care, who cared very much – whose career was the most important part of their life.

But all I had to do to solve this problem was to stop caring – to stop worrying about whether or not I had a traditional career, to consider a full-time respected job irrelevant to my status and self-esteem. I say 'all I had to do' as though this was easy, whereas of course this was a sizeable psychological change, which reversed all ideas about work and careers drummed into me since school.

The first stage of the process, of downgrading the importance of paid work, happened to me almost by accident. My temporary contract with the publishers came to an end, and I needed another job, so I asked around the designers I knew in the publishing art department to see if there was any other work I could do, and was offered work on the layouts of books, setting the text and images. But on a freelance basis

– I would only be paid if I worked, if the company decided there was enough work for me.

Since then, in 1999, I have always worked freelance. I did not embrace the idea at first – on the contrary I worried that I no longer had a regular, guaranteed supply of money. What if I did not earn enough money one month? How would I pay my rent, or afford to go out? But once I had accustomed myself to the idea, the psychological change was enormous. I was no longer required to care about the work, in as much as I no longer needed to show any interest in the well-being of the company. No one expected me to be part of the company 'team', no one demanded I go on team-building days, or attend company celebratory drinks. Indeed I was not, to my delight, even allowed. All that was required of me was that I was reliable and good at my work – and, ironically, my work was perhaps better than before, since it was not burdened by the despondency of being a salaried employee. Best of all I was not expected to *pretend* to care about the fortunes of the companies for whom I freelanced – because I was an outsider, tied to them only by our agreement that I would do good work and they would pay me for it.

I had less money, but more time. Paid work slowly became less important than other things – that is, the rest of my life. Less important

than the work that I wanted to do for myself, and life with my friends and family for which I had previously not had time. As I worked less I found time to write more regularly. And so my paid work, rather than dominating my life, took second place to the work I really wanted to do, the work that I did find fulfilling, and that might possibly be a useful addition to the world.

Following the downgrading of paid work's importance came the thought – why does it matter what this work is, this work that I do for money? Paid work does not need to fulfil me – what it needs to do most of all is to allow the greatest amount of time for the work I really want to do. Paid work did not have to mean a 'good' job, one of the traditional nine-to-five careers commonly pursued by graduates. Even though I continued to earn money at the publishers, in a profession that others considered a career, I did not need to think of it as important. I just wanted the work for the money. And if money is the primary reason for work, rather than fulfilment or status, there is a much wider choice of jobs than the all-encompassing careers fought over by countless graduates.

I came to think of the work that earned me money as *subsistence work*: work that I only needed to survive, not for fulfilment and self-esteem. I wanted to call 'work' the writing and other projects I did for

myself, because those – on occasion, now with slightly more regularity – I did find fulfilling. I had, unknowingly, come round to the idea of traditional careers advice: find work that you love and you will be happy. I just had not realised that this work might be unpaid, that it did not need to be the work I did all week.

And from this realisation I saw that what was needed in place of traditional careers advice was two different types of advice about work: one for how to develop fulfilling (and almost certainly unpaid, at least to begin with) work, and one for how to find subsistence work to pay the bills. Any careers advice needed to specify with which type of work it was concerned, because subsistence work and your own work were very different things.

The principle criteria of subsistence work is that it does not need to be fulfilling, it does not need to be work that you love. It is preferable if it is, but has a much more important, overriding criteria: the best subsistence work is simply that which allows you the most time and freedom for your own work.

And this made some professions much more appealing as paid work than others. Though I was lucky to have fallen into good subsistence work, I wondered what kind of advice I might have found useful when younger. What kind of work should I have sought in order to earn

money? What are good subsistence professions in general? I saw that the criteria applies to the work culture of the profession far more than the actual content of the job. A good subsistence profession has these characteristics:

- **Part-time or freelance work is common**
  Although an irregular supply of money is a factor in freelance work, there are many benefits in exchange for this low-level concern. Freelance work is better paid because it is less secure, so you earn more for less work. No one expects you to work longer than the hours for which you are paid – if you do work longer, you are paid more. You take holidays when you want, not just on bank holidays. You decide if you want a day off.
  Plumber, fitness instructor, nurse: it is common to work part-time or freelance work in professions such as these. As a lawyer or television executive it is not. This was what – although conveniently, through no real decision-making on my part – was good about the freelance work I had fallen into for the publisher: not that it was in publishing, but that it was freelance. You control your time, and so are more able to fit your paid work around hours that suit your own work.
  It is difficult to work freelance when you start – you have to build

up a reputation and clients, and in some professions it is easier to do this from an employed position. You may choose to take an employed position to begin with – but plan from the beginning how you might convert this to freelance. The principle is, choose the job less by its content than by its flexibility: if you take an employed position, make it in a profession where freelance work becomes easier later on. And if you need to work full-time when you start (when it is difficult to support yourself on the most junior wage), keep in mind that part-time/freelance work is your goal, your overriding ambition for paid work.

- **The workload is within your control**
  The culture of your subsistence job should not cause you to work more than your agreed number of hours. In teaching, additional unpaid hours are 'expected' of you. No work should be expected of you in subsistence work. This paid work is not for the love of it, it is for the money. Choose a profession where additional hours are optional, paid, and paid at overtime rates.
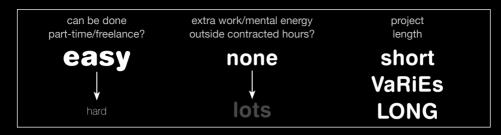 'Within your control' also means your subsistence work does not occupy your thoughts outside of the contracted hours. Thinking is reserved for your own work. If a lucrative part-time job requires that your boss and clients can call you at any point during your

spare time, or if you have responsibilities that mean you think about work in your spare time, this is not good subsistence work. Workers who view their paid work as of primary importance consider work outside of contracted hours 'part of the job'. This is bad subsistence work. You are not being paid. Avoid professions where this is part of the work culture.

- **The length of each project within the job is short**
  (A less important criteria.) I found that in order to take satisfaction from writing I needed to work at it regularly, at least an hour or two most days of the week. Without this regularity its importance diminished. So for me subsistence work needs to be shorter projects, of only a few hours each if possible, so that it can fit around the time-slots I made for my own work. To be a self-employed builder, for example, is not good subsistence work for someone like me if each project requires full-time hours for a number of weeks. Plumber and fitness trainer are jobs with short projects. Computer programmer, although a job with freelance opportunities, often involves lengthy projects that require full-time work for many months. This does not mean work in such a profession is not possible as subsistence work, simply that depending upon the nature of your own work, short projects may

the best types of subsistence job

can be done part-time/freelance?	extra work/mental energy outside contracted hours?	project length
easy ↓ hard	**none** ↓ **lots**	**short** **VaRiEs** **LONG**

firefighter **waiter** TEACHER

bUiLdEr estate agent **electrician**

childminder LAWYER GrApHiC dEsIgNeR

ENGINEER HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER **tRaNsLaToR**

POLICE OFFICER

plumber **hairdresser**

TELEVISION EXECUTIVE **tefl** fLiGhT aTtEnDaNt

car mechanic **teacher** **bookkeeper**

zoologist **massage** **fitness**

doctor **nurse** **therapist** dentist **trainer**

CoMpUtEr EnGiNeEr PILOT WEB DESIGNER politician

banker **JoUrNaLiSt** COMPUTER PROGRAMMER

insurance agent

supply **teacher** **wedding photographer**

be more suitable. Even if they are the dull projects no one else wants. Especially if they are the dull projects that no one else wants – there will be less competition for them.

If your own work has different time requirements you will not find this criteria as important. You may work for a number of weeks to earn money, then spend a few weeks on your own work. But again, the needs of your own work take priority.

In other words: the conditions under which paid work is carried out – the work culture – are more important than the content when evaluating whether a job is 'good' subsistence work. At school when I thought about the type of career I might enjoy, I only considered the type of work involved. I paid no attention to the <u>actual conditions under which I would do this work</u>. When I thought about how I would like to work on a film, I only thought about the excitement of being on set whilst someone called 'action', and did not for a moment think about having to live in a hotel and work seventy-hour weeks for three months. A programmer friend was excited to find a better paid job as a consultant, but did not consider the consequences of spending three days of every week living hundreds of miles away from home. A midwife friend loved the idea of helping mothers give birth, but had paid no attention to the fact that babies are born at night as well as in the day, and found that she

was completely unsuited to working night shifts. We pay little attention to how the conditions of our hoped-for profession will affect us, when the hours, the shift patterns and the location of the work has far more impact on our everyday lives than the tasks involved.

The ability to work freelance, control of your workload, and length of each work project – these are the factors you need to consider for any paid employment. These are the aspects that give you control of your everyday life, regardless of the content of the work. The content, the tasks involved, are a poor indicator of the work culture. Prestige jobs, such as my job on the film, are the worst example of this, particularly those connected to any kind of celebrity. For a while I made the mistake of taking on freelance work with a well-known author, seduced by better pay and the glamour of working on bestselling books. Her celebrity meant tighter deadlines and the insistence by editors and art directors that you must drop everything if last minute alterations were needed, because this project was so high-profile. The workload was completely out of my control – I spent a lot of (unpaid) time organising the rest of my life, just so I had the ability to drop everything. And I thought more about this job in my spare time – worried whether the quality of my work was satisfactory, whether it was good enough to keep this prestige job that caused me to worry more than usual.

I was much happier, much more mentally stimulated when I had design projects that were short and required the least amount of mental input – because now I had time to be mentally stimulated by my own work. 'Interesting', 'exciting' and 'working on prestige projects' meant long hours, more stress and no control. Routine and mindless were what I was after. Much better that I saved interesting and exciting ideas for my own work.

But these factors which make for good subsistence work are not at all obvious if you have not yet worked in a particular profession. You will not find this information on a company website, or in a job description – you will have to find this out for yourself. This is one use for work experience: to observe the people who work in that profession, to form an understanding of the work culture. Ask friends, or relatives' friends, who do a particular job, question them about the actual nature of their job, the expected overtime, the mental commitment. The questions to ask are not, 'is the work interesting?', or 'is this work relevant to the talents I had identified at school?'. These are the questions to ask of your own work. Questions to ask about subsistence work are, 'are there opportunities to do this work freelance?', and 'how much will this job affect my life outside of work?'.

If you treat the above criteria as the important factors in choosing subsistence work you might think this limits you to boring work. (Though do not easily dismiss boring subsistence work, not if it is well-paid, flexible and fits well into your life. Some of my best subsistence work has been the most boring.) But the work you do for money does not *have* to be boring – it can be interesting, just so long as it is also good subsistence work by the criteria above. Many of the socially-rewarding jobs discussed in chapter 3 – doctors, teachers, nurses, charity workers – are possible subsistence jobs, in that these are professions where it is possible to work part-time or freelance.

Ironically the people I know who freelance or work part-time in socially-rewarding work appear to enjoy the rewards of these jobs more easily. They are less affected by all the aspects that make them unrewarding: unpaid overtime, overwork, office politics. Work as a bank-staff nurse, or a specialist teacher unattached to a school, or a temp for any profession, and you have much more control over these aspects of your work. The careerist mindset looks down upon temporary or freelance staff, views them as 'not part of the team', but this attitude must just be ignored. I have no desire to be part of such a team, because membership demands extra work and stress.

Of course many rewarding jobs, even when part-time, require

training, which may mean full-time training. These and other good subsistence jobs may require a degree. The cost of the training for subsistent work has to be weighed against the loss of control and the debt you will incur as a result. (More about this in the University chapter.) All these considerations need to bear in mind the basic principle: that subsistence work is of secondary importance and exists to support your own, more fulfilling work.

If you are currently stuck in a stressful full-time career that you wish to leave, you may think that you do not want to start again in different subsistence work. But there is no reason why your current work cannot become subsistence work. The first step is just to think of it as such – in other words to regard it with the level of importance it deserves, that is, very little. Can you elbow your way down to a position of less responsibility, where you can work freelance? Can you make yourself indispensable in some area, become an expert in a particular specialist task, and therefore are paid more for less work?

Everyone who earns money though freelance or casual subsistence work has, at least at the start, one major fear: that their work will dry up, that they will have no money, that they will not be able to pay their bills. The fear that my work this month will not continue next month, that I will find no other work, loomed over me at first, and I still worry about

it now, just as I have done for more than fifteen years. In those years I have taken on additional financial responsibilities, including children. When I am not worrying myself, I listen to other freelancers' money worries, over and over, month after month as the work continues.

Because the worry is out of proportion to the reality. Money worries for freelancers are a constant presence, but they are a minor background hum. The existence of this low-level worry is an indication of the freedom that freelance work brings you, and has to always be weighed against the worries of a careerist, the worry of what they gave up in exchange for job security: control of their own life. Job security with a regular, reliable wage is the trump card that the full-time careerist waves over the freelance subsistence worker – forgetting that their employer waves this same security card over them, the stick with which to beat uncontrollable amounts of work from them.
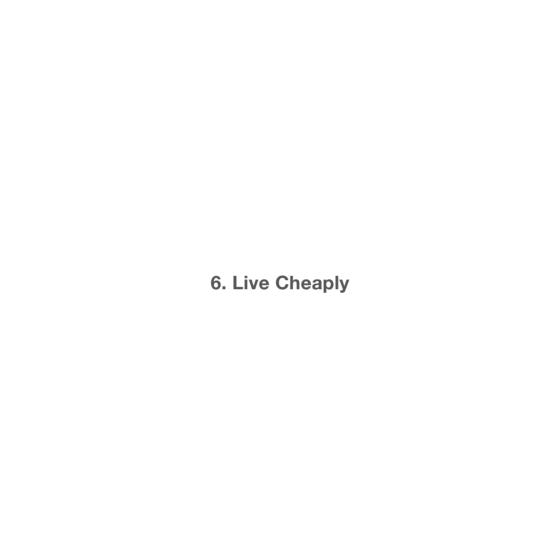
There are alternative forms of job security when you have freelance subsistence work. A less worrying way to work is to find jobs for two or more different people – if one source of work dries up, this does not cut off all sources of income. And I found another, more unexpected source of security, when I began to work and associate with other freelancers: the existence of other, previously invisible, freelance work. Not work that is advertised, but almost always found by word of mouth. The

freelancers I know support and have supported their own work with, amongst other things: multiple cleaning jobs, chaperoning boarding school children, delivering artwork, teaching workshops, working as a film extra and being a drug trial test subject. There are many other subsistence jobs of this type. You only find out about this category of jobs if you hang around with other people who want the seek the same kind of paid work, and who know you are on the lookout. Full-time careerists are completely unaware of the existence of this kind of work.

'Luck is being ready.' <u>Brian Eno</u>

Subsistence work is one part of a self-made career – the boring part, perhaps. Find the right kind of work, the kind that allows time for work you really value, and the importance of subsistence work in your life fades.

But subsistence work that is not part of a full-time career will lack one thing: a career salary. This is the subject of the next chapter: how to live cheaply.

6. Live Cheaply

I have casually breezed over one large consequence of subsistence work: that part-time work means part-time money. This was not deliberate – in no way am I suggesting that the self-made career is only available to those with a trust fund. But if you want to have time for innovative work, the conclusion is unavoidable: if your subsistence work is less than full-time, then you must live on less than full-time wages. If you want a life that is not controlled by a career, you must live cheaply.

This seems unrealistic, I'm sure. If you are young and poorly paid you probably feel it is difficult to survive even on a full-time wage. I can picture my younger self howl with derision at the idea. 'I've been living on next to no money for ages,' he complains. 'If I have a full-time career and the salary that goes with it I can live as I want, leave home, have nights out without watching my money all the time, be independent. I don't care if I don't find my career fulfilling right now. I want to enjoy myself.' And if you are not so young, already in a full-time job and better paid you may also feel it is difficult to survive on a full-time wage. But it is not difficult – so long as you are happy to return to the kind of lifestyle you had when young and poorly paid.

To live cheaply I have to watch what I spend, to worry where my money goes. I act like someone who does not worry, whilst carefully watching what I spend, whilst being a cheapskate. I worry because this

is the only way to make spare time for myself. The act is because to not worry about money, to not be a cheapskate, has a certain cool to which I am not immune. But it is not cool. The people I know with large debts and hefty spending habits are not those with time for their own work. They are the people chained most tightly to their careers.

What was not obvious to me at first was that if you treat your own work seriously, if you dedicate time to discovering the fulfilment that your own innovation can provide, this fulfilment and self-esteem more than compensates for a reduced inability to spend money, to purchase stuff. There is an amount of money I need for basic survival, and there is an additional amount of money that I can choose to spend on comfort and pleasure. But fulfilment from the process of work that I truly value is more than replacement for the comfort and pleasure of stuff. To have a number of hours a week when I am able to do work I value, that I feel could be a useful addition to the world, in which I can feel a meaningful sense of progress, is more than compensation for cheap living. (I may be completely wrong that the work is a useful addition to the world. I can only hope.)

Whatever money worries there are in a self-made career, it is not as though I had less money worries when I had a traditional career and full-time salary. Every career made demands on my income that

I was unable to avoid. I spent a chunk of my salary on travel to work, and a larger proportion on more expensive accommodation within easy commuting distance of central London. I bought food for lunch each day so as not to waste precious time in the morning making it for myself. But much more financially crippling was my changed attitude to the money left over: now I viewed the gadgets, the alcohol, the holidays I could purchase as simply what I deserved for working so hard. At one time I viewed holidays as an adventure – now they were a well-earned break from the stress of work. Now I *deserved* the lifestyle my salary afforded me – and needed that money to purchase all that I deserved. I wanted to live in a decent flat, to own the latest technology, to drive a car, to have a foreign holiday each year, and all this I deserved because I worked hard.

I worked my way through my salary each month. There was a similar amount left over as in the times when I had no job – that is, nothing. The rate at which my salary reduced to nothing was intensified because I chose to associate with one group of people whom also had a lifestyle to which they thought themselves entitled: my work colleagues. I had little choice in the matter – I was part of the team. Senior work colleagues set the expense level of our socialising, and provided a blueprint for our more junior aspirations. By signing up for a career I had

signed up to the arms race for a bigger and better lifestyle, in which I could not help but feel the pressure to participate.

My problem in these early career jobs (a problem of which I was entirely unaware) was that there was no obvious alternative. I had no work of my own I was keen to pursue, no fulfilling use for my limited spare time. The primary use of any spare money from my career salary was entertainment, the fallback option. I needed to spend money to avoid boredom. But there is a cheap alternative to boredom: work of your own that you genuinely value, work to which you are keen to return whenever you have the opportunity, which almost certainly costs less money to pursue than entertainment. Once I had discovered this, cheap living was a much easier option.

> 'I sell an app for money, then I spend less than I make.'
> Instapaper creator <u>Marco Arment</u>

Living cheaply has a long history of shame. The idea that less money means lower status is deeply entrenched in our psyches. It is associated with anti-commerce hippies, with being anti-modern and anti-technology. For me it is none of these things. The only problem with cheap living is how you feel about cheap living, and once you stop associating it with low status it is no problem at all. I am fortunate to

have always had enough to get by, but this has been easier because I have always tried to need less to get by. If I find a cheaper way to do something, I am pleased because it means I can work less and so have more time for my own work. I view the cheap option with glee, rather than annoyance or shame.

There are cheaper options for everything. Houseshare rather than live on your own. Couchsurf or houseswap rather than pay for holiday accommodation. Hitchhike. Read library books. Be a late-adopter and using secondhand technology that traditional careerists trade for new models: a cheap mobile, not an expensive smart phone. Live somewhere where a car is unnecessary. Buy clothes from charity shops and wear them until they fall apart – there are plenty of great clothes in charity shops, given away by people with careers. Cook for yourself and your friends rather than eat out. Cheaper options almost always require more time and energy – but you have more time and energy when you work less because you do not have a career.

When I first started working I knew about the cheaper options – I just chose not to take them. The hard part was to see all these choices as useful rather than demeaning. Careerists are forced into the expensive option: they eat out because they have no time to cook, they are forced to take time off on more expensive public holidays, they do not have the

time to search around charity shops for clothes. Careerists say, I want a salary so that I don't have to worry about money. But there's the choice: either you worry (a little) about money, or you worry about to where exactly your life disappeared.

Houseshare, dress cheaply, don't eat out, share costs with your friends – this all sounds as though directed at teenagers and twentysomethings. As though for those who are older, who have more responsibilities, particularly those who have children, this kind of cheap living is not possible. How can you expect to earn part-time wages and pay rent on accommodation big enough for a family, or pay for a mortgage?

For me the cheap living principles did not change as I grew older. I have a family with two children, and live in a house. But before that we lived in a flat for ten years (it was quite a squeeze by the end). There was the choice of moving somewhere bigger, if we were prepared to work more hours to pay for it. But we chose to stay there and live cheaply, because we valued the kind of life we had, whilst earning money part-time. We had, in effect, a tiny houseshare consisting of just one family. We were fortunate in that we started a mortgage at the beginning of the 2000s – we might not be able to start a mortgage now given the current housing situation. But the point is that the other

cheap-living options remain the same: we dress from charity shops (or passed-on clothes for the children), do without much of the latest technology, houseswap or camp for holidays, and avoid restaurants and takeaways. When the children were very small we actually felt like we had more money than before, because we did not socialise as much. Now the children are older I regularly need to explain to them that the flipside of having less money spent on them is that we get to spend more time with them. They don't understand or like the argument. But they do like me to spend more time with them.

If all this sounds dull and boring – that is a judgement on the value of a costly social life and a spacious house filled with nice things. The subject under discussion is whether it becomes more difficult to live cheaply as you become older. I do not think it does, because even if you have children to pay for, when older you are almost certainly in a position where you have better contacts, and better knowledge of how earn more money from your subsistence work. Over the years I have worked freelance I have become better at identifying the work I can do quickly for the best hourly rate, and tried to steer myself towards that kind of work as much as possible. We may have (relatively) more expenses when older, but we have greater earning abilities per hour worked.

And I hope to continue in the same manner into old age. I do not have a pension, because I do not envision the need to spend more than I do now by the time I am old enough for a state pension. The amount of a state pension is probably about what I live on now. It is possible I will have earned more by that time – who knows, I may even have earned money from my own work. But much more useful is to have work that I love to sustain me in my old age. Anything else is just a bonus.

How much money you need to live is just that – the amount you need to live the life you make for yourself. If you plan to quit your career with a full-time salary for lower wages these are the questions you have to ask: what are my essential costs, and which are the costs I only have because I have this full-time career? The work you do for yourself is the centre around which all the costs for food, accommodation and socialising revolve, whatever your age. If this work is good and fulfilling, these costs become less important. When I hear some of my peers in their forties talk about the increased expenses that come with a family and growing older, they do not describe unavoidable expenses: they describe the trappings they either think they deserve because they work hard (the meals out, the foreign holidays, the leisure accessories, the gym and sport club membership), or the extra costs they cannot avoid

because of their full-time career. A full-time career distorts the idea of unavoidable expenses.

You can avoid this, even if you currently have a family and career. If you are wondering how to quit, living cheaply is one of your first steps. Reduce your expenses now, live as though you already work part-time, so you know how to when the time comes. If you have a partner or children you will need to discuss with them why you will not have so much money in the future. Part of the reason for choosing such a life is for the option to spend more of it with a partner or children. This is the exchange: to give up expensive holidays and other material treats for a life of less stress and more self-esteem. To strive for a life from which you don't need a holiday.

My biggest aid to cheapskate living is cheapskate friends. I would never call them this to their face of course – everyone is susceptible to the taint of the cheapskate label – but that is what they are, and that is why I like them. They prefer the cheap options: eating at each others' houses rather than in a restaurant, camping in this country rather than flying abroad. If you are serious about finding time for your own work, a certain ruthlessness is needed – you have to spend less time with expensive friends and more time with the cheap ones. Happily this principle goes hand-in-hand with the pursuit of your own

work – because the best support for work of your own and a self-made career is others who purse work of their own, and therefore want to live cheaply.

Cheapskate friends understand why I do not want to waste money, and will not make me feel ashamed of it. Careerist friends with large salaries suggest the more expensive options – because their ability to spend validates their reason for working so hard.

If your response to the above is, 'I don't want to dress from charity shops', and, 'I really want the latest smart phone', think of this as the careerist mindset. The idea that a permanent salary and the ability to buy stuff are essential to life is drummed into us from the day we first spend money in a shop, the desire for money an extension of our biological drive for survival. We all worry that without a certain amount of money we will be out on the street, homeless, vulnerable. But in developed Western countries actual biological survival is not a problem for the majority of people. The problem that occupies more of us is how to make the most of our survival, how to live a fulfilled life. And fulfilment comes from work that we originate and value ourselves.

The careerist mindset that insists we need a full-time salary is imposed by school, by our parents, by advertising, by government and society as a whole. Most of all it is imposed upon us by traditional

careerists, who are constantly at pains to justify the fact that they have chained themselves to a career for the entirety of their working lives. The parent who says, 'I worked hard all my life, why do you think you are any different?' cannot bear the idea that perhaps they wasted their life with all that work for someone else.

Ignore the pressures from society that suggest you are a failure because you do not have money to throw around. You are not failing to 'give something back to society' if you do not have a full-time salary – not if you discover and develop work that you think is important to bring in to the world. Part of this valuable work may, if you choose, be unpaid socially-beneficial work. Then you can benefit society in ways that a career exploiting the gullible never will.

One day, you may make money from your own work. But money is not relevant to the work's main purpose, which is satisfaction and self-esteem. Read the biographies of musicians, film directors and writers who have become wealthy from their work, and you find that the majority of them started out living cheaply in order to do what they loved. But aside from wealthy successes, much more common are the successful people who did not become wealthy: the artists, amateur sportspeople and inventors, even some of the well-known ones, who scrape a living in order to spend their lives at work that they love. Those

with self-made careers are able to lead the lives they want not because they have plenty of money to do so, but because they have enough money to do so.

> 'My wife and I have lived on 37 dollars a month before now, and always with sang froid. I doubt if I make more than 400 per annum – and knock about Europe as I like.'
> D.H. Lawrence
> (revelling in his cheap living freedom, even when working as a full-time writer)

7. University is Not Essential

This far I have been entirely scathing of one widely-held belief: that the path to a fulfilled life follows a route from school to university to salaried career – because this route is one that misses the possibilities for innovative work. So it will come as little surprise if I now proceed to condemn university as a waste of time and money, and irrelevant to a life of fulfilment and self-esteem.

Except this is a surprise to me. Because although that is the obvious conclusion from what I have written so far, I find myself loathe to say university is a waste of time. I greatly benefitted from a university education, from experiences that, had I missed out on, may have meant that I did not end up where I am now, doing the kind of work that I genuinely love.

I benefitted from a university education in every way – except perhaps from the attainment of a degree. I enjoyed my degree course, was stimulated by what I learnt – but the useful benefits that I took from university, as in the ones that inform a self-made career, were by-products of the actual education. I learned many useful skills, because I had to leave home in order to attend, and because there were thousands of other people my own age who also attended the university. I learnt how to negotiate living in a household of peers rather than family members, how to cook for myself, how to ration money so

I had some left at the end of a term. There were the lessons of how to set limits on drinking and drug-taking and not sleeping when there was no parental brake. University was also the first time I had the chance to experience proper education, by which I mean the first time I had the time and inclination to take a piece of knowledge and investigate it further, for no other reason than my own satisfaction. Those three years could have been the foundation of a self-made career, had I taken full advantage of the opportunities to start my own work. But I was too busy taking in the heady education of doing whatever the hell I liked.

But even though I benefitted from all these non-academic lessons, that does not mean university is the only place they can be found. Everything I learnt, all those things that have nothing to do with careers and paid work, I could have discovered without going at all. They are open to everyone, including those innovators who did not pass the required exams for university. What is needed, should you not be able or not want to go on to higher education, is to truly not go, to absolutely not go – to instead go far away from home in the other direction, preferably abroad. Somewhere where you can not-study most effectively, and yet still soak up the lessons of communal living, of responsibility for yourself, free of the sense that what you are doing is just one more step in the direction of a traditional career. Work a

subsistence job, live cheaply and save some money to go away – or if you cannot wait that long, save money for the plane ticket and work when you get there. But you have to get away. When I travelled and worked abroad in my mid-twenties I unwittingly brought back with me reminders of the most useful lessons of university: of how to live with people my own age, of how to look after myself, of how to manage money. Along with some additional ideas from meeting and observing people who had found or created subsistence work that I did not know existed. Most of all I had experienced the pleasure of deciding what to do for myself – the pleasure of innovation.

It is not enough simply not to go to university – you have to force yourself to go somewhere else, rather than mope around, mope around until you are strong-armed by outside forces into one conclusion, that the only alternative is a full-time job.

Of course for some people a university degree is very useful, is in fact essential for their self-made career: in scientific research for example, or training in a particular skill at art college. If, when you leave school, you have a burning desire for this particular kind of valuable work (work that you value rather than your parents or your careers advisor), then go to university. But if you do this you have a different problem: how to avoid debilitating debt that may still control your life

years later. Obtaining money is not a problem for students, there are many institutions happy to lend – the problem is whether you are able to manage this money, to live by at least some of the principles of cheap living. If you mire yourself in credit card and overdraft debt at university, the kind that cannot be deferred, it is the biggest barrier to time for valuable work upon graduation. Student loans are not, for now, such a great problem, since you are only required to repay them when you have a certain level of income. But if you have just left school and are offered free money in the form of overdrafts and credit cards, it is sorely tempting to take on other less deferrable debts.

The temptations of debt make university at the present time a less-and-less worthwhile option as the place to learn university's non-academic lessons. If the actual academic education is not essential to your valuable work – if as yet you have no idea of the nature of this work – it may be better not to go. At least not straight away. The rampant increase in student debt through tuition fees in the UK has had a major effect on the worth of a degree – as a greater proportion of people become graduates that expensive degree certificate becomes a less valuable work ticket. Is it a good idea to burden yourself in debt for this if you can find university's benefits elsewhere?

And if you do work hard to obtain the more valuable career tickets,

the better degrees from the more prestigious universities, the high price of higher learning has changed the notion of what a university education is for: the expense has made the degree a financial transaction rather than an educational experience. Today's potential students now, understandably, view university as an investment: I am paying a five-figure sum for this, so I had better obtain a good degree, to ensure a well-paid job, in order to pay it back. If you go to university in this spirit the non-academic lessons are less likely to be taken on board, as the workhorse attitudes drummed into you in order to pass school exams continue. If university is spent simply focussed on passing a degree you are less likely to ease yourself out of the mindset that paid work is the number one focus in life, are less likely to see the value of work you do for yourself. With the focus intensified on a career at the end upon graduation, students subconsciously take on the values of the companies for whom they would like to work, even before they start – propelled as they are by debt and choice of degree course towards lockdown careers, where their own values are submerged, perhaps forever, beneath the values of a company.

Intelligent university graduates are the people society needs to allow time to struggle with society's challenges, to have time to consider innovative work of their own. But the main struggles for many intelligent

graduates are debt and the pressures of a career. There is no time to concentrate on anything else, not because they do not want to, but because are not able.

> 'Students who acquire large debts putting themselves through school are unlikely to think about changing society. When you trap people in a system of debt, they can't afford the time to think.'
> Noam Chomsky

If you need to go to university for the work that is valuable to you, or if you are keen on a type of subsistence work that requires a degree such as teaching or nursing, then go. But even if you do, there is nothing – apart from your school and parents – to compel you to go straight away. Or after just a single year. The emotions I felt upon leaving school were the joy that suddenly I had no parents or teachers to tell me what to do, and the fear that there were no parents or teachers to tell me what to do. This was not a good state of mind in which to make decisions that had profound effects on the rest of my life. There was a great temptation to allow university to institutionalise me again straight away – an institutionalisation that, upon graduation, many students hand immediately to an employer.

To take yourself out of the institution is to become an adult who

thinks for themselves – which is part of the necessary learning process for a self-made career. In a life comprised partly of subsistence work and partly of your own innovative work, you tell yourself what to do. Overcoming the fear of this (or at least reducing it to manageable levels) is part of the process for anyone who wants time for their own innovative work. It cannot be somehow avoided. The opportunity to tell yourself what work you will do, to organise how and when you work is, for me, the greatest asset of a self-made career.

What would I change if I were to leave school now, how would I aim for a self-made career? I would train in a good subsistence profession, maybe as a plumber or TEFL teacher, go abroad to work in casual jobs and learn the non-academic university lessons, and think about and investigate the work I really wanted to do. When I came home, however much time later, perhaps I would go to university, or perhaps not.

My parents might despair and wonder what all that time spent in education was for. Society might view this as a waste of education. But is that really all parents and society think education is for, a ticket to a career? Real education opens your mind to the possibilities of the world. The useful parts of education are not for anything in particular, at least not for anything that might translate into earning potential. They are for prompting you in the direction of the work that will sustain you

for the rest of your life.

Whatever you do when you leave school, the main goal is to avoid the depressing life of so many graduates: those who leave university with a degree but no knowledge of work that truly interests them; who spend their first months, perhaps years, miserably toiling in part-time subsistence work, and spend all their spare time desperately applying for that golden career job; who, when to their joy they finally land their longed-for career realise, more months or years down the line, the stress and lack of fulfilment that this career provides; and who then wonder, now burdened with their career lifestyle, how they might return to the part-time subsistence work that they had upon graduation.

Skip the career part, pursue meaningful work of your own supported by that subsistence work, and this life is easily avoided.

8. The Joy of Work

All through this book I have insisted that work for yourself, truly innovative work, is a real source of genuine fulfilment. Without providing any kind of explanation as to why I found this to be the case. I have spent chapters outlining why the work culture of traditional careers prevented me, and, I think, prevents people generally, from finding fulfilment, and I have said much about what it is that traditional careers lack. But nothing that explains what it is about work for yourself that actually does make it fulfilling.

Because it is not at all obvious why work that you do for yourself is fulfilling. If you currently work in a full-time career that you wish to quit, this is one of the big obstacles: it is not obvious that quitting to do work of your own will actually be more fulfilling that the work you do now, for money. Certainly it was not obvious to me, for a long time.

There is a widely held belief that innovative work of your own is limited to a certain section of the population, those people who are 'creative', a belief that I held throughout my twenties and into my thirties. I did not consider myself one of these creative people (not least because the label sounds pompous and invites ridicule). I wanted to be one of these people, but I did not know how. The work I wanted to do was writing, but I had not studied English at university. Nor had I been to art school, another route that provides an automatic creative label.

Somehow I did not qualify, except for the fact that I loved writing and literature and wanted to write myself.

Besides, I found writing a chore. My early attempts provided no fulfilment or pleasure in the actual writing. None, that is, beyond the fantasies about the prestige that publication of this unfulfilling work might bring, of the life I might lead if I earnt money from writing and no longer had to support myself with subsistence work. I took no pleasure from writing stories in the present because I was too busy picturing myself writing stories full-time in the future, imagining a time where I wandered into a bookshop and saw my book displayed on a shelf. I was not taking pleasure from writing, but from publishing, in that easiest of formats, inside my own head. Despite my lack of joy in the work I continued, driven by the far-distant idea that this was what I wanted to do with my life: make a living as a full-time writer, writing stories in which I took no pleasure and found no fulfilment.

What helped me progress through those early years of disillusionment was a sense of discipline. Although I was not convinced I had the ability to write anything valuable, either to myself or others, what I did have was self-discipline: I had the ability to make myself sit at a desk for an allotted number of hours a week and concentrate on the task in hand. I followed the advice to set myself regular time slots each

week, and began to arrange my subsistence work around these time slots. It did not matter how many hours they totalled – when my children were young it was perhaps an hour in the morning three times a week. But setting these hours for myself gave the work a seriousness that helped me value what I was doing.

Discipline over my work, insisting that I kept regular writing hours, even if I spent the time staring at a piece of paper or screen, eventually lead to an understanding of the first feature of fulfilling work: sovereignty, ownership of the work. Writing may have not yet been fulfilling for me, but at least it was my own work, work that I had told myself to do, and had then gone ahead and completed. Work which, in contrast to a traditional career, I decided when and how long I did it for.

Sovereignty over work is the real goal of education, I believe. It is what all good teachers want to instil in students at school. They want students to investigate a range of activities and ideas about the world, in order that they might get an idea of which interest them the most. Not so they might use those of most interest as a way of earning money, but so they might continue to enjoy learning all through their life. Genuine education helps people understand the sense of fulfilment provided by sovereignty over the work you choose – it enthuses children (and adults) in a subject to the point that they continue the work in their own time,

without further need of encouragement or reward. But good teachers and schools are hampered at all turns in their attempts to demonstrate the value of sovereignty, geared as school is towards careers.

Because schools teach little about the value of sovereignty, it is something you must learn for yourself. And to do so you have to put in the time it takes to understand this, the hours spent sitting at a desk or wherever it is your work takes place. You have to overcome all the encouragement not to understand the fulfilment provided through the creation of something from nothing, even if those beginning somethings are less than you hoped for. Other people – what selfish individuals – encourage us to socialise with them and enjoy ourselves, rather than use spare time for work of our own. We encourage ourselves not to do our own work, because there is no penalty for not doing so, we argue with ourselves as to why we have better things to do.

'The idea does not have to be big. It just has to be yours. The sovereignty you have over your work will inspire far more people than the actual content ever will.' illustrator Hugh MacLeod

It is the sovereignty of publicly-successful people that we admire, I think, when we wish we had their money and fame. We admire their ability to choose the work they do, or their ability to do no work: the

sovereignty that their money or fame allows. But many of us can have a version of this sovereignty, without the added difficulty of becoming rich or famous.

It is hard to recognise the value of sovereignty when you start your own work. What helps with this recognition is the second feature of fulfilling work: a sense of progress. A sense that the work you do today has improved on the work you did previously. But if recognising the value of sovereignty is hard at first, recognising progression in your own work is almost impossible. You have nothing by which to judge progress. You do not know where you are going with your own work because you have no particular goal, except an ultimate and ultimately false goal of seeing a book you have authored in a bookshop, or playing a gig to thousands of adoring fans, a goal which, as an indicator of how you should proceed with your work on a day-to-day level is completely useless.

When I started writing my whole sense of progression was bound up in what other people thought of my work, in how others viewed and praised my writing. And other people did not view or praise it at all, because I showed it to no one. I merely judged how others might think about it if they had happened to read it. When I did come to show stories to other people, they were, at first, inevitably people I

knew well, because strangers had no interest in what I had written. I gained no useful feedback, not because my friends and family were poor judges of writing, but because I could not distinguish between praise for the actual writing and praise as encouragement – because they were my friends and family. Even later, when I sent stories to competitions without any success this did not tell me much. Maybe the story was quite good and ranked just below the winning entries. Maybe it was appalling. Maybe it was amazing and just not the taste of the judges. Whichever it was, it told me little about whether I had made any progress or not.

We might feel like an imposter because no one has given us permission to do this work, but that is just <u>Imposter Syndrome</u> – who am I to think I can do this kind of work? But everyone suffers from Imposter Syndrome. Including all those people who are now famous for the works they created. Countless biographies of creative people contain a line to the tune of, 'I was not really sure what I was doing until X wanted to publish/booked me for/exhibited Y'. Everyone feels like an imposter until that time when a stranger praises your work and perhaps even offers money for it. Even later in their self-made careers many of the famous only appear to feel a little less of an imposter.

The sense of progress I eventually discovered was not from any

external source or reaction of others. At first I did not even recognise it as such, because it was an amnesiac's progress, and I did not really know how it was happening. During the months and years of sitting down at my time slots, whenever I reached a stage I had not reached before – when I finished the outline of a story, when I finished a story, then a collection of stories – each time I looked back in disbelief that this completion had actually taken place, that I had managed to reach this stage of the work. When I read back on what I had completed, it was generally better than I remembered – not necessarily good, or something I wanted to show to other people, but at least contained something I liked, and which I was not aware of writing at the time of doing so. And eventually there existed something which, at the beginning, I had completely doubted my ability to create. I thought it impossible I could ever write anything book length – how on earth do you construct a coherent theme through that many words, I wondered? Yet if you are reading this then obviously I managed to do so. This book, from the point of view of my beginner self, is an impossible achievement. Its value to others is debatable, but its value to me is huge. And from each stage that feels like an achievement further progress is possible.

The gulf between what you think you can do now and what you

might do in the future is the same. How you progress from one level of work to another is, for me, completely unknown. And this unknownness is what hinders us so much from making a start. It makes progress slow, if each time you sit down you lose the conviction of your ability to repeat the process. Perhaps this is a definition of innovative work: the endless succession of unconscious progression to a new stage of the work, where once again you find yourself stumped as to how to continue. I do not think I am alone in this experience – this is what I imagine people mean when they talk about writing from the unconscious: they are mystified at their previous ability to create what they see in front of them.

I have never lost this fear of sitting down at the start of a writing time slot. Each time I am convinced that nothing good will come of writing that day. Sometimes nothing does come – but much more often something does, something I was not expecting. The delight that, more often than not good writing comes out of a writing session, despite that fact that it is never expected – this is the sense of progress that provides fulfilment. It is, I think, along with sovereignty, the fact that this work only happened because I told myself to do it, that makes work fulfilling.

This kind of fulfilment is not found in a traditional career. No one

looks back at the tasks they have completed in their salaried job and sits in wonder at how they happened. You look back, glad that these particular tasks are over, and move on to the next tasks. That's if you look back at all, because there is no time to look back, to reflect on work. There is little sense of progress and certainly no sovereignty, for you do not control the work, you do not decide to do the work, and the work would simply be done by someone else if not by you.

We are held back from starting the work that we want to do by the idea that we have no talent for it. If we follow a traditional career as a vet or a engineer we are given confidence by the fact that we have passed exams in the subject and someone has accepted our job application for the position. In work of your own no one provides this kind of confidence boost. You have no idea if you have a talent for the work you want to do. But talent to me feels like not much more than a label given with hindsight to people who managed to complete some work that they wanted to do, in a manner that delighted (at least some) other people.

With work of your own you have something else guiding you – the fact that you love this kind of work, that you have a desire to do this thing. Your search for the work you want to do might be guided by your particular body shape or mental aptitude, but it is also guided by

your tastes. Taste is not about talent but about your ability to recognise value. I valued the work of other writers, and wanted to replicate that value. Part of your own work is recognising why the work of others that you value *has* value. If you love someone else's work it is an indication that this is the type of work that you think would be valuable to the world if you produced it yourself. Your taste is a guide to the nature of the work that you might love to do yourself.

'It's the same process as anything: identifying who your heroes are, figuring out what they did, and then just going and doing it.'
filmmaker Steven Soderbergh

This is why we tend to, and why it is right to copy our heroes when we start out – we try to reproduce the value that our heroes have brought into the world. What we eventually copy, if we work at and progress our own work, is not the content or exact style of others, so much as the effect that their work has on an audience. The work of our heroes is our teaching material when we start: the parts of other people's work that we value, the lines, the scenes, the themes, the sounds, the organisational principles that brought us pleasure.

'For a songwriter, you don't really go to songwriting school; you learn by listening to tunes. And you try to understand them and take them apart and see what they're made of, and wonder if you can make one, too. And you just do it by picking up the needle and putting it back down and figuring it how these people did this magical thing.'
musician Tom Waits

Although I write here about the work of writing, this is only because that is the work that I like to do. This book will appeal more to people interested in writing books, because it is writing written in a book. But innovative work is not limited to writing, or music, or anything traditionally called 'arty'. To categorise certain subjects as 'the arts' is misleading, if it gives the impression that innovative work is only to be found in the arts, that creativity and innovation are only found in writing, film, music, painting, and so on. There is creativity in everything: in science, in sport, in starting your own business, even in more abstract ideas such as organising people. For me, 'art' means any activity in which you feel the pleasure of innovation, and an 'artist' is someone who values their own innovative work, who values it more than the work they do for money.

'There are various myths about creativity. One is that only special people are creative; another is that creativity is just about the arts; a third is that it's all to do with uninhibited "self-expression". None of these is true.'
education advisor Sir Ken Robinson

It took me a long time to understand the value of sovereignty and to feel a sense of progress – to understand that this was what made my own work a more worthwhile pursuit than a traditional career. Part of the problem was that all discussions I had on the subject were with myself, were inside my head. I rarely found the opportunity to discuss my lack of fulfilling work, because I knew no one else who felt the same way. In fact I probably knew lots of people who felt the same way, lots of people with whom I worked in full-time careers. But we were not having these conversations. Or at least not having these conversations with an eye to what the alternative might be, but simply bemoaning our careers.

What I needed was to find a gang – a group of people who felt the same way. I found this by accident, when I rented a space in a studio for my freelance work, sharing with other freelancers, each with their own version of the self-made career. Here I found a gang of like-minded people – and it felt like a gang, because we had a shared ambition, to stay away from the unsatisfying culture of traditional careers. I was able to talk about the work I really wanted to do in a way that I could never

have mentioned in my career jobs, where it always seemed like the ambitions of a fantasist. Here it felt like something that could happen. I could make mistakes and fail in my ambitions and still feel they were a worthwhile pursuit. It did not matter that the other gang members did not do the same work. Writing is a solitary activity, but even though I did not actually work with them, it was a comfort and inspiration to have a circle of friends who understood a desire to write books. Or play music, or build computer games, or study the planets. Or do anything that gave higher priority to their own work rather than work for money.

If I had not accidentally found a gang, I would have needed to seek one out. If you do not have a gang, go find one. (The value of training for your work is as much for meeting a gang of similarly-interested people as the skills you learn.) The power of a good gang cannot be overstated. Not only for the mutual support, but also the social warmth of belonging to a group, a group formed around the shared idea of how to live in the world, around the idea that innovative work is the path to a fulfilled life. Rather than the shared idea of a careerist workplace, which is usually how we sell this product to as many people as possible.

This work of your own is, alongside subsistence work, the other half of a self-made career. One day this work of your own may turn into something from which you earn money. But that is not the purpose of

the work. Sovereignty and a sense of progress are the purpose of the work. They are the features which make work joyful, are the features which are not found in a traditional career. If money becomes the main purpose then it has become subsistence work, and you will need some new innovation to keep you interested again.

Do not wait until you are 'ready' to start your own work. No one is ever ready – you become ready by working. If you need to convince yourself to quit your current full-time career, a major part of the encouragement will be if you have an inkling of the fulfilment your own work can bring. You need to investigate this before you quit, need to set yourself however many hours you can spare whilst still working in your career. All you need to be ready to start is to finish reading any more books on creativity and innovation – both the reading and writing of which are stalling tactics to avoid beginning the work we really want to do.

Schedule time slots each week that are only for your work, be disciplined and keep to them. Record the details of the work of your heroes that gives you pleasure as a spectator, and try to work out how to reproduce that effect. Find your gang. Just make stuff.

9. Success

For most of the time I wanted to be a writer, I ignored the fact that by actually putting words onto paper I was doing so, was being a writer. But this was not an argument I found particularly convincing, because if writing is just about putting words onto paper, then everyone is a writer. If we are judging on word count alone, careerists who produce lengthy corporate reports are much more prolific writers. I wanted the writing I did to be something more than this.

At first the goal appeared obvious: to be a writer was to be a published writer, was to see your books on the shelves of a bookshop. To receive prestige and, ultimately, to make a living of writing, to earn enough not to need subsistence work. Success in the innovative work that we want to do is very often equated with converting this unpaid, part-time hobby into a full-time paid job, a self-made career from which you can make a living.

But one of the main reasons I found it hard to find pleasure in writing was that I was not even looking for it in the actual process of creating something. I bored myself in my vain attempts to be successful: in the hours spent researching short story competitions, in discovering which were the easiest and cheapest to enter, in altering the style and word count of my stories in order to give them more of a chance. None of this work to be successful was successful. Instead it took me away from

the times when I did feel pleasure, in actually putting words on paper, in trying to recreate the delight that I feel at reading the writing of others.

Many 'successful' careers, it seems to me, are tainted by the same confusion. The measure of success is the size of its impact on society, of the status the success confers. The television presenter, whose work impacts on thousands of people, is more successful than a gardener. (This is another attraction of careers in television, film and other media, because they have a large public impact compared to other professions, an impact easily recognised by others.) But this measure says nothing about the pleasure taken from the process of the successful work, or about the impact of the process on that other part of your existence that is the rest of your life.

'When you work for free, no one can tell you what to do'
photographer Bill Cunningham

Whilst I failed to feel successful as a writer, there was an alternative feeling of success: I had, at least, managed to set myself up with a routine and situation that made the unpleasurable writing the main focus of my week. I had freelance subsistence work which meant I could spend a couple of hours each morning, a few days a week, working away at the unpleasurable writing. I had sovereignty over

my work. And from this situation that I had created I took a lot of satisfaction. What I did not have was a nine-to-five career, but instead the opportunity to control my life in a way that gave me a sense of self-esteem – self-esteem that had been missing from all my careers. I could schedule my week as I liked, I could attend any of my children's school events without thinking, I could take the afternoon off if I chose. I had the opportunity to work for free in socially-beneficial work, for which I had no time in a full-time career. But most of all, although I did not feel like I had made a success of writing, life was at least centred around this work, this work that I really wanted to do, however unsuccessfully, that I hoped had value should I ever have the chance to show it publicly.

Even without the mythical book in a bookshop, this life in itself felt like a kind of success – certainly in comparison to the traditional careers that were out of my control. The cheap living and less than full-time hours spent on subsistence work means the government label me underemployed, with the implication that I must be folornly wandering the streets, bored, or drowning my sorrows. But this is not how I feel, because I have work of my own to do – work that I hope is of value to the world, should it one day be finished in a way to my satisfaction. A purpose that was missing when misemployed in any of my traditional careers, where I did not care if the end result was of value to the world,

and most of the time knew that it was not.

This version of success is one of 'sustainable creativity' – a phrase coined in Miranda Ward's book *F##k the Radio, We've Got Apple Juice*, about the rise and supposed fall of the band Little Fish, who chose to leave their major record label and support slots on stadium rock tours in order to take back control of how they made their music, on the cheap in their own home. This kind of sustainable creativity simply requires that you make enough money from your own work to continue to do this work, regardless of public recognition. I want to alter this definition slightly – and say that sustainable creativity means you make enough money from a combination of your subsistence work and (perhaps) your own work, that you continue to have time for work that you love and value. How much of the work you sell and how much you sell it for is irrelevant. This kind of sustainable creativity is possible for any number of people who have a desire to do innovative work.

I could never have felt this kind of success in any of my traditional careers. There I was unhappy with the routine I made for myself – or rather had imposed upon me. I did not feel the satisfaction of progress in career work: if I completed a piece of work well, or worked particularly hard, I made my life worse, because now I was expected to work at this more efficient level. Instead I felt a fool, because I did not

think the work added any benefit to the world, and because I had no interest in benefitting the company or its shareholders.

A greater sense of success came when I eventually started to take pleasure from the work itself, and felt less desperate to be traditionally successful, to be published. Which was when I had my first story published. I was still pleased to see something I had written accepted in a magazine. But this was hardly the big deal I imagined – mainly because I now had to write something else. And to claim this as some kind of success, which was actually publication in an obscure magazine, was just a pointless act of egotism. (Though it would be equally pointless to pretend that writing, an act of putting down your thoughts on paper and imploring others to read them, or making music, or even starting a charitable organisation, contains no element of egotism.) But what I mean to say is that I stopped worrying about being published because I felt like I had already succeeded.

At what, I'm not exactly sure. Not, certainly, in making a living or even any money at all from the work I wanted to do. More that I had managed to arrange my life so that the continued effort to do this work, of trying and usually failing to bring about the effects of delight which I felt from other people's work, was the main focus of work, of a working life.

Of course it would be good to be widely published. But if that were to happen I do not really want it to affect the pleasure from the process of the work. It is possible that some day I might earn a living from writing – though I doubt it, given my pace of working. But if we do earn money from our creative work, enough to give up the subsistence job, then we have to continue to earn money from this work. And we then have a continued need to create saleable work in the future. We are in danger of being back in a position much like the careerist, where in order to make enough money to live from the sale of paintings, or vintage clothes, or whatever, we must now cater to the tastes of a particular patron or strand of public taste. This was the reason Little Fish gave up the success of their stadium rock tours – this kind of success damaged the simple pleasures of making music.

As Austin Kleon reimagined for the end of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*:

Willy Wonka: But Charlie, don't forget what happened to the man who suddenly got everything he always wanted.
Charlie Bucket: What happened?
Willy Wonka: He had to run a fucking chocolate factory!

Does this mean I ought to fight against the egotistical desire to be a successful, that is, famous author? I would not have to do any

subsistence work, I could spend every day writing, and spend every day worrying that my next book would sell enough to earn a living. I would certainly finish more work, but I'm not sure I would enjoy the work any more, or that the sum total of my life's activities, time with my family, a social life, subsistence work and my own work would add up to any more. Even as I write this I wonder if I believe what I am saying – I know I want acknowledgement and fame as much as the next egotist, even if it does me no good. But this desire is about status, is about social value. It is separate from, and works against the intellectual value of work for yourself and the pleasure of innovation. Perhaps all I can do is bear in mind that prestige is of a lower quality value than to feel successful to yourself, and that prestige has adverse as well as beneficial effects.

> 'Prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not on what you like, but what you'd like to like.'
> Paul Graham

All this is, of course, very convenient for someone who wants an excuse for why they have not managed to make their work public, for why they have not been published, for why they have not started the organisation they want to see exist. I use it every time work does not

go well. But the sensation of success is mainly about whether we do the work to our satisfaction, and only in part what others think of it. Your experience of creating the songs your band plays, or the children's forest school you create, or the course that you organise around your passion for astronomy, is determined to some degree by their reception, but mostly by the fact that you have created them at all.

This low-level, unfamous innovative life is available to many people, to many stuck in a career and who know it is not the work that they most want to do in the world. The size of the audience or number of beneficiaries from whatever you do does not have to be large to feel the pleasure: <u>art is art for an audience of six</u>. The illustrator who holds an exhibition simply to show their work publicly has succeeded – the one who holds an exhibition and is disappointed when they make no sales has not.

A reasonable question is, if to work for free and in relative obscurity is fulfilling and meaningful, where are the examples of this in society? The people held up as success stories are the business leaders, the public scientists, the famous artists, all of whom appear to find pleasure in paid work. Why should I not aspire to be one of them?

We can, of course. But the public success of these people is a social success that tells us nothing of how they feel about the creation

of their work, of whether they took any pleasure from innovation. It tells us nothing about whether the work they did was of value to themselves or to the world at large. It is a definition of success that is often out of their hands and warped by fame. Many more people can experience the success that comes from innovative work of their own, without the need to make the extra effort to become famous as well. If self-esteem from work is your aim, becoming famous is an accidental by-product of the fact that your work brings pleasure and meaning to yourself and others anyway.

There are many unknown people who work away at their own innovative work, who perhaps make some money but not a living from it, who support themselves with other subsistence work, and who live a life they consider successful because they are fulfilled by what they do. They are just not visible, because their notion of success is not the same as society's notion of success, and they do not inspire the next generation to follow their example because of this invisibility. I knew of no one who lived like this when growing up, and so had no model to emulate – it took me until my thirties to even be aware of their existence.

I said in the introduction that the people I know who live this way are the happiest people I know. Perhaps it is not that they are the happiest

– pleasure from innovative work is not about being happy all the time. But they are the ones with the most sense of purpose, with the most life in them. Because they are constantly looking for what to do next in their work, are constantly learning. Not always making the valuable work they want, but learning more about how they might do so. The search for and creation of work of value is the source of their fulfilled lives.

Take semi-retirement from the world of full-time careers. Do so before you even start. You are not slacking off, you are not joining the ranks of the unemployed, you are not failing to give something back to society. You are only unemployed, or underemployed, if you have no work of your own with which to fill your spare time. Your own work, should you decide, can have social benefits beyond those you can achieve in a career job, because your work derives from your own values.

When you are immersed in a project of your own which gives you pleasure, you always have the knowledge that there is work to which you are keen to return. You don't get Sunday-evening blues before Monday's work, because even if you have to go to subsistence work the next day, it will not be long before you can get back to the work that really thrills you.

The work we do for ourselves may one day make us money – it

may even make us a living. Or we may work away at it, unknown, unacknowledged and probably, despite the fact we have stuck with it because it is what we like to do above anything else, lamenting the fact that we are unknown and unacknowledged. But this scarcely matters. We have to do something with our lives – and that something is better off as a perpetual search for the work of which we feel truly proud.

'One way or another we all have to write our studies of D.H. Lawrence. Even if they will never be published, even if we will never complete them, even if all we are left with after years and years of effort is an unfinished, unfinishable record of how we failed to live up to our earlier ambitions, still we have to try to make some progress with our books about D.H. Lawrence.'
writer Geoff Dyer

Notes and further reading

Introduction

p7: *to emphasise that you do not need permission*: a great influence on my ideas about permission, or lack of it, was all-round outsider artist Bill Drummond, in particular his book *100* (2012), where he talks of his own epiphany about permission upon reading *Play Power* by Richard Neville, an account of Neville's social radicalism in the 1960s: http://bit.ly/billdrummond100

Chapter 1: No Value, No Innovation

p15: *I saw the best minds of my generation*: Neal Stephenson quote from Solve For X talk: http://bit.ly/nealstephensonminds

p20: *The reality is the best people who have great ideas in science*: Chris Viebacher quote from talk by Steve Keil at 2012 The Next Web conference: http://bit.ly/stevekeilinnovation

p21: *Draw the art you want to see*: from *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon, p48 (2012): http://bit.ly/steallike. Great ideas throughout the whole book, particularly about just getting on with your own work. (See also www.austinkleon.com for his always interesting blog and tumblr posts.)

Chapter 2: Creative Careers are Not Creative

p34: *LucasArts eulogies*: see article by Ben Kuchera in penny-arcade.com: http://bit.ly/lucasartseulogies2

p36: *Art suffers the moment other people start paying for it*: Hugh MacLeod quote

from his book *Ignore Everybody: and 39 Other Keys to Creativity*, via: http://bit.ly/macleodartsuffers

Chapter 3: Rewarding Careers are Not Rewarding

p41: *if you wanted to be . . . a cause-championing journalist*: see George Monbiot's advice to aspiring journalists: http://bit.ly/monbiotcareers

p45: *We can so easily slip back*: Rainer Maria Rilke quote from the essay *Requiem for a Friend*: http://bit.ly/rilkeslipback

Chapter 4: No Control

p58: *We knew we could never trust a company*: Robert Krulwich quote from his 2011 commencement speech to Berkeley Journalism School (video: http://bit.ly/krulwichspeech, transcript: http://bit.ly/krulwichtext2)

p63: 'misemployment' definition from Alain de Botton's website The Philosopher's Mail: http://bit.ly/debottonmisemployment

Chapter 5: Subsistence Work

p80: *actual conditions under which I would do this work*: for some online accounts of the realities of various professions, see this collection on my website I add to from time to time: http://bit.ly/careerrealities

p86: *Luck is being ready*: Brian Eno quote from *On Some Faraway Beach* by David Shepherd (2008), a good biography of the ever-interesting Eno: http://bit.ly/somefarawaybeach. Quote taken from Brian Eno's own (but difficult to find) *A Year With Swollen Appendices,* his diary from 1995, a fascinating account of someone constantly trying to produce innovative work: http://bit.ly/enoswollen

Chapter 6: Live Cheaply

p92: *I sell an app for money*: Marco Arment quote via Austin Kleon's blog: http://bit.ly/marcoarmentcheapliving

p97: *Strive for a life from which you don't need a holiday*: see also Neil Gaiman and Neil de la Grasse on why truly fulfilling work never feels like 'work': http://bit.ly/gaimantyson (from the highly-recommended brainpickings.org)

p99: *who scrape a living in order to spend their lives at work that they love*: for a great account of how thirteen US bands thrived successfully in the 1980s on next to no money whilst independent of major record labels – and how this can be a model for anyone's creative and productive life – see *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (2001) by Michael Azerrad (particularly the chapter on The Minutemen): http://bit.ly/ourbandyourlife

p100: *My wife and I have lived on 37 dollars*: D.H. Lawrence from *Out of Sheer Rage* by Geoff Dyer (Abacus, 1998), p139: http://bit.ly/outofsheerrage, originally from D.H. Lawrence's *Letters, Vol. 3, Oct 1916 – June 1921* (edited by James T. Boulton and Andrew Robertson, 1984), p734

Chapter 7: University

p108: *Students who acquire large debts*: Noam Chomsky quote originally from ottawacitizen.com: http://bit.ly/chomskystudentdebt

Chapter 8: The Joy of Work

p116: *The idea does not have to be big*: Hugh Macleod quote from his essay *How to Be Creative* on Change.org. The most downloaded talk on a website primarily devoted to business start-ups and thus hard, stressful work, tells how the author fitted his creative illustration work around his paid job, and how it changed his life. Also great

insights about how money always changes your relationship to work. (Download a PDF: http://bit.ly/howtobecreative)

p118: *Imposter Syndrome*: see *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon, p27 (2012): http://bit.ly/steallike

p122: *It's the same process as anything*: Steven Soderbergh quote from vulture.com interview: http://bit.ly/soderberghprocess

p122: *copy our heroes*: for much more on why it is fine to copy your heroes, see *Steal Like an Artist* by Austin Kleon (2012): http://bit.ly/steallike

p123: *For a songwriter, you don't really go to songwriting school*: Tom Waits quote from NPR interview: http://bit.ly/tomwaitssongwriting

p124*: There are various myths about creativity: Ken Robinson quote from Guardian interview:* http://bit.ly/kenrobinsoncreativity*.* Education advisor Ken Robinson's great TED speech 'Schools Kill Creativity' (http://bit.ly/kenrobschools) is the most watched video on the TED site. His most recent book, *Finding Your Element*, looks at how we might discover the work that will give our life meaning)

Chapter 9: Success

p130: *When you work for free*: Bill Cunningham quote from the film *Bill Cunningham New York*: http://bit.ly/donttakemoney

p132: *F**k the Radio, We've Got Apple Juice* by Miranda Ward & Little Fish (2012): http://bit.ly/f-ktheradio

p134: *But Charlie, don't forget what happened*: Austin Kleon's Willy Wonka quote: http://bit.ly/manwhohadeverything

p135: *the intellectual value of work*: for a much lengthier analysis of why status from work and the pleasure of innovation are in opposition to each other, see Robert Pirsig's

book *Lila: an Inquiry into Morals* (1992): http://bit.ly/pirsiglila. The argument is too long to include here (and you might need to read his classic earlier book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as background), but the short version is that this is the explanation of something we know instinctively: that the desire for fame, prestige and recognition works against the pleasure we take in the creation of work

p135: *Prestige is like a powerful magnet*: Paul Graham quote from How To Do What You Love: http://www.paulgraham.com/love.html

p136: *art is art for an audience of six*: from a talk by Brian Eno on surrender in art at the Brighton Festival 2010. Video of Eno talk on the same themes: http://youtu.be/OnR1ogLvNiE

p139: *One way or another we all have to*: Geoff Dyer quote from *Out of Sheer Rage* (Abacus, 1998), p231: http://bit.ly/outofsheerrage