

A Job to Love

Alongside a satisfying relationship, a career we love is one of the foremost requirements for a fulfilled life. Unfortunately, it is devilishly hard to understand oneself well enough to know quite where one's energies should be directed. It is to help us out of some of these impasses that we wrote *A Job to Love*, a guide to how we can better understand ourselves and locate a job that is right for us. With compassion and a deeply practical spirit, the book guides us to discover our true talents and to make sense of our confused desires and aspirations before it is too late.

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A Job to Love

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OF LIFE**

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Introduction

i. How we came to desire a job we could love

One of the most extraordinary and yet quietly routine features of our age is the assumption that we should be able to find work that we not only tolerate, or endure for the money, but profoundly appreciate, for its high degree of purpose, camaraderie and creativity. We see nothing strange in the remarkable notion that we should try to find a job we love.

It is possible to be highly sympathetic to this wish and yet refuse to see it as either normal or easy to fulfil and to insist that, in order to stand any chance of honouring it, we need to lavish concentrated brain power, time and imagination on its underlying complexities.

For most of history, the question of whether we might love our work would have seemed laughable or peculiar. We tilled the soil and herded animals, worked down mines and emptied chamber pots. And we suffered. The serf or smallholder could look forward to only a very few moments of satisfaction, and these would lie firmly outside the hours of employment: the

harvest moon festival next year or the wedding day of their eldest child, currently six years old.

The corresponding assumption was that if one had sufficient money, one would simply stop working. The educated classes among the ancient Romans (whose attitudes dominated Europe for centuries) considered all paid work to be inherently humiliating. Tellingly, their word for business was *negotium*: literally, ‘not-enjoyable activity’. Leisure, doing not very much, perhaps hunting or giving dinner parties, was felt to be the sole basis for a life of happiness.

Then, at the close of the Middle Ages, an extraordinary shift began: a few people started to work for money and for fulfilment. One of the first people to successfully pursue this highly unusual ambition was the Venetian artist Titian (c. 1485–1576). On the one hand, in his work he delighted in the pleasures of creativity: depicting the way light fell on a sleeve or unlocking the secret of a friend’s smile. But he added something very odd to this: he was extremely interested in being paid well. He was highly astute when it came to negotiating contracts for supplying pictures, and he upped his output (and profit margin) by establishing a factory system of assistants who specialised in different phases of the production process, such as painting drapery (he hired five young men from Verona to paint the curtains in his work). He was one of the initiators of a profound new idea: that work could and should be both something you love doing and a decent source of income. This was a revolutionary idea that gradually

spread across the world. Nowadays it reigns supreme, colouring our ambitions perhaps without us even noticing, and helping to define the hopes and frustrations of an accountant in Baltimore or a game designer in Limehouse.

Titian introduced a complicating factor into the modern psyche. Previously, you either pursued satisfaction making or doing something as an amateur without expecting to make money from your efforts, or you worked for money and didn’t care too much about whether you actually enjoyed your work. Now, because of the new ideology of work, neither was quite acceptable any longer. The two ambitions – money and inner fulfilment – were being asked to coalesce. Good work meant, essentially, work that tapped into the deepest parts of the self and could generate a product or service that would pay for one’s material needs. This dual demand has ushered in a particular difficulty of modern life: that we must simultaneously pursue two very complicated ambitions, although these are far from inevitably aligned. We need to satisfy the soul and pay for our material existence.

Interestingly, it’s not just around the ideal of a job that we have developed high ambitions that combine the spiritual and the material. Something very similar has happened around relationships. For the largest part of human history, it would have been extraordinary to suppose that one was meant to love (rather than merely tolerate) one’s spouse. The point of marriage was inherently practical: uniting adjacent plots

of land, finding someone who would be good at milking cows or who might bear a brood of healthy children. Romantic love was something distinct – it might be nice for one summer when one was 15, or might be pursued with someone other than one’s spouse after the birth of the seventh child. Then, in around 1750, a peculiar shift began to take place here as well. We started to be interested in another extraordinarily ambitious idea: a marriage of love. A new kind of hope started to obsess people: that one could both be married and properly admire and sympathise with one’s partner. Instead of there being two distinct projects – marriage and love – a new and more complex ideal emerged: the marriage of passion.

The modern world is built around hopeful visions of how things that had previously seemed separate (money and creative fulfilment; love and marriage) could be united. These are generous ideas, democratic in spirit, filled with optimism about what we can achieve and rightfully intolerant of ancient forms of suffering. But in the way we have tried to act upon them, they have also been catastrophes. They constantly let us down. They breed impatience and feelings of paranoia and persecution. They generate powerful new ways of being frustrated. We judge our lives by ambitious new standards by which we are continually made to feel we have fallen short.

It’s an added complication that, although we have set ourselves such impressive goals, we have tended to tell ourselves that the way to attain them is not essentially

difficult. It is simply a case, we assume, of following our instincts. We’ll find the right relationship (which unites passion with day-to-day practical stability) and a good career (which unites the practical goal of earning an income with a sense of inner fulfilment) *by following our feelings*. We trust that we’ll simply develop a special kind of emotional rush in the presence of the right person or will, once we’ve finished university, sense a reliable pull towards a career that is right for us. We put a decisive share of our trust in the phenomenon of gut instinct.

A symptom of our devotion to instinct is that we don’t readily recognise much need for training and education around getting into a relationship or in the search for a career. We take it for granted, for instance, that children will need many hundreds of hours of carefully considered instruction if they are to become competent at maths or learn a foreign language. We understand that instinct and luck can’t ever lead to good results in chemistry – and that it would be cruel to suppose otherwise. But we’d think it odd if the school curriculum included an almost daily strand over many years of classes on how to make a relationship work or how to find a job that accorded with one’s talents and interests. We may recognise that these decisions are hugely important and consequential, yet by a strange quirk of intellectual history we’ve come to suppose that they can’t be taught or educated for. They really matter, but we seem to believe that the right answer will simply float into our brains when the moment is ripe.

The aim of The School of Life is to correct such unwittingly cruel assumptions, and to equip us with ideas with which to better accomplish the admirable (but in truth highly difficult) ambitions that we harbour around our emotional and working lives.

ii. How alone we are on our search

Several obstacles typically stand in the way of finding a fulfilling job. Some of these have been well understood already, and established institutions are in place to help us overcome them.

1. A lack of skills

It's long been understood that many fulfilling jobs require you to possess a particular range of skills and specialist ideas. You might need to be able to juggle landing slots confidently or negotiate in the East Asian language of a key group of international clients; you might need detailed knowledge of the anatomy of the inner ear or the tensile properties of concrete. So, over time, schools, universities and technical colleges have emerged as places where the obstacles created by professional ignorance can in large part be addressed. We have become adept at facing the problems created by a lack of skills.

2. A lack of information about opportunities

It has not always been easy to know where the good jobs might lie. For much of history, people had no

way of easily understanding where to look for openings. You could have been the ideal gamekeeper for an estate three counties away, but would never end up in the role for the banal but immovable reason that you'd never even heard there was such a position on offer. You might have had the perfect temperament and qualifications for running a new cotton mill, but if you didn't happen to know a friend of a friend, your career as a lock keeper would have continued without relief until the end. This fateful issue too has now been well identified and addressed. We've invented a plethora of employment and recruitment agencies, headhunting firms and networking sites, together ensuring that we can pretty much be guaranteed to have sound insights into where the demand for different forms of labour might lie.

3. A lack of a coherent goal

But one major obstacle to finding a suitable job remains, and it is one that has received much less attention than the other two, even if it is the most important of them all: the painful challenge of working out what kind of job one is well suited for and would love to do. Not knowing what one seeks is simply the most important of the three hurdles: without it, education and market opportunities do not deliver on their promises.

To address this problem, we have collectively invented surprisingly little. We do give it some attention, of course. Schools and universities prompt students to sit down with a counsellor and mull over the question

for an hour or two; and we're likely to run across some kinds of diagnostic tests intended to steer us towards career options that might suit our personalities. Many of these are based on the Myers–Briggs questionnaire, originally developed in the first half of the 20th century.

Such a test is likely to involve hundreds of multiple-choice questions, many of which ask one to rate occupations such as 'working outdoors' or 'helping others in a retail environment' with terms ranging from 'not interested' to 'strong preference'. The underlying intention is very benign. Such tests seek to identify our personality types, of which there are, classically, 16 options, ranging from ISTJ (introversion, with strengths in sensing, thinking and judgement) to ENFP (extroverted with strengths of intuition, feeling and perceiving) – and then align us with work where these characteristics could be of optimal value.

However, as we currently know them, these diagnostic exercises have some extremely important and interesting shortcomings. They might feel quite long – you could spend up to an hour doing one – but given the weight of the overarching question (how to lead a good career), this might actually be far too brief. Furthermore, they tend to be vague and detached in the guidance they offer. They might alert us to the fact that we are strongly creative but score less highly on the rational indicators, or that we could thrive in a team leadership role or in a position with customers,

but they don't home in on the details of our particular individual capacities. We might be steered towards an oddly open-ended array of career options: our answers indicate that we might be suited to working with animals or in a job involving numbers.

We can get a sense of how inadequate current provisions are by considering some of the people with the most fulfilling careers in history, and trying to imagine what the current test providers might have advised them to do. Suppose Mozart had done a Myers–Briggs test. Once he'd submitted his responses, he might have received a version of this kind of advice: 'Your optimal work position involves working imaginatively with ideas or designs. This includes jobs in the arts, performing, creative writing, and also visual design, lateral thinking, business creativity, adapting or coming up with new ideas and working in situations where no rulebook exists. Example jobs include: graphic designer, training consultant, wedding planner, public relations.' That's very far from *Don Giovanni* or the Clarinet Concerto in A Major.

The absurdity shows how removed many tests are from being able to direct an individual with any level of seriousness or focus. The more fulfilling the career, the more the current style of exercise looks incongruous and ineffective.

Truly useful career advice for Mozart would have needed to be more specific: having taken an ideal test, which probed the really crucial parts of his

personality, strengths and deficiencies, it might have offered guidance such as: ‘Take the contrapuntal complexities of late Baroque cantatas, simplify them and extend their emotional range; try to collaborate with a witty, but philosophically minded, librettist; your results suggest you are particularly suited to integrating comic or ironic elements into solemn and grand situations. Focus your remorse and anxiety about death in writing a Requiem. Overall goal: reorient the course of Western musical culture.’

Such limitations don’t only arise in the rare case of geniuses. It would not be a major problem if a job-aptitude test did not do perfect justice to 0.1 per cent of the population. But a more troubling, yet more accurate, thought is that a huge quantity of human talent of very high calibre remains inadequately developed because of a lack of good advice and guidance at crucial moments. The failure to receive genuinely well-targeted counsel affects us all – even if we can usefully recognise the deficiency first in extreme cases such as that of Mozart. A great many people are vaguely, and not inaccurately, haunted by the idea that they could in principle do something properly world-changing, although they can’t put their finger on what or how. We are in drastic need of richer sources of guidance.

The English poet Thomas Gray (1716–1771) meditated on the melancholy theme of unexploited talent while looking at the headstones of farm labourers in the graveyard of a small country village. He wondered

who these people had been and what, in better circumstances, they might have become:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway’d,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

...

Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

...

Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest

Thomas Gray, ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1751)

Gray’s elegantly expressed thought is genuinely disturbing and, in a sense, an outrage: with the right opportunities and guidance, so-called ordinary people are capable of major contributions to existence.

Today, the obstacles aren’t simply about a lack of education or an inability to identify where the opportunities might lie: they comprise a failure to arrive at accurate analyses of our capacities and guidance about how to develop these. This is the tantalising ideal that career diagnostic tests currently only gesture towards from a great distance.

One special problem with today’s tests is that they stick rigidly to kinds of work that already exist. This isn’t surprising – the tests originated at a time when the job market was relatively stable and career options

were generally clearly defined. But it's eminently possible that the kind of work someone is best suited to (and around which it will be possible for them to love what they do) doesn't exist yet. One might have a great deal of potential for a kind of job that has yet to be invented.

If, in 1925, the 36-year-old James O. McKinsey had taken the recently invented Myers–Briggs test, it would have revealed his strong intellectual and problem-solving aptitudes. The job suggestions might have focused on academia (in fact, he had recently been appointed as a professor) or a career in industry. What it wouldn't have done was to steer him towards the thing he was actually going to be very good at: integrating the two. It would not have suggested to him that he search for a new kind of work, hitherto unnamed. He would have been alone in his search. In his case, things worked out well for him: the next year, he founded McKinsey & Company and initiated the idea of management consultancy, which (at its occasional best) helpfully brings together research and practical decision-making. Inadvertently, tests like the Myers–Briggs – with their suggestions of ideal jobs based on existing categories – edge us away from what might actually be the most interesting line we could pursue.

We should not blame ourselves for our confusions. Our culture has set us a devilish problem: promising us that fulfilling jobs exist while leaving us woefully unprepared for how to discover our own aptitudes

and appetites. The purpose of this book is to help to correct an epochal problem that quietly gnaws at our lives and tramples upon our legitimate hopes.