

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Spring 1999

Dear Reader,

I love my job (really!), though there are aspects of it, such as running a business, that are less appealing to me than others. Still, they're all part and parcel of what it means to work, and looking back over the path I've taken, I'm thankful for the opportunities I've had, proud of the efforts I've made, and happy with the work I do.

My husband, on the other hand, has been less than happy with his own career, which was really a second choice for him, and it looks like he'll be moving out of it soon. While he's very excited with the prospect of changing careers, there are going to be trade-offs, and decisions of this magnitude are difficult to make, no matter how clear in the end.

As we've thought and talked about our different career paths, I've been led to think more broadly about the nature of work, and about its impact on our lives. So much of our daily routine, our material comfort, and even our identity, is tied up in our jobs. I feel fortunate to have found work that I love, and hopeful that my husband will soon as well. And, I wish each of you good luck in your own career journey.

Just the facts...

- Americans hold an average of about nine different jobs between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two.
- Combined work hours of working couples rose almost 15% between 1968 and 1988.

Our Working Lives

We're all familiar with the question "what do you do?" Everyone understands it's about work, which isn't surprising since work represents, for most of us, our most concentrated and materially productive hours. All the detail, variety and routine of our workaday lives, from what we actually "do", to the hours we spend engaged in it, the people we interact with and the place or places we go to do it, dictate how we spend many of our waking hours, and absorb, for most of us, the largest share of our intellectual and emotional attention.

Because work is "what we do", it is also, to a significant degree, who we are. Nearly all of us are intimately familiar with the language and routine, the rhythm and detail of our jobs. Even if we're adamant about our right and our ability to take off our "work face", the skills and talents we develop in the course of our careers are a part of us. They color everything from our language and interests to our interaction styles and problem-solving strategies. In the parlance of my profession, work is part of our "identity". Think how often we answer "what do you do?" not with "I work at..." or "I do...", but "I am..."

While there's no absolute, direct connection between work and identity, it's important to remain conscious of the influence work has on our lives, and to understand that, in choosing what we do, we can have a significant impact on who we are, and who we will become. Many of us have had (or will have) multiple careers, some perhaps lasting decades. Career paths are almost infinitely varied. Some are straight and narrow, others seemingly random in scope and direction. Often our career changes either spring from, or precipitate, major shifts in our lives and in our sense of who we are. In the best cases, that's exactly what we want, and why we contemplate changes in the first place.

To some degree, our career decisions are (and must be) guided by basic material and logistical considerations. On the other hand, this is only part of the story, and usually seems to occur more in its early chapters. With so much identity tied up in "what we do," and so much time and energy spent doing it, it's only natural that we eventually start asking more fundamental questions about the nature of our work and its effect not only on who we are, but who we want to become. As we grow older, "success" often comes to mean something less tangible and infinitely more complex than the standard cliches.

It would be wonderful if each successive career represented the blossoming of some cherished talent, or the exercise and development of some set of intrinsically rewarding skills. Of course, opportunities of this sort are rarely laid in our laps. Much more often than not the price is sacrifice, and courage in the face of the daunting unknown. Many of the people I meet in my practice are wrestling with difficult choices involving their careers. I often wish I had a ready supply of easy answers, but I don't. The simple fact that they have taken it upon themselves to examine what they do and explore the connections to who they are is clearly a step in the right direction, wherever their path may lead.

Work in the Fast Lane

At a party recently, I found myself listening to a group of Silicon Valley professionals as they spoke seriously, energetically and enthusiastically about the details of their work. At some point, the conversation drifted into talk of buyouts, stock options and IPOs, and I was struck by the universal desire amongst the group, all of whom had been excitedly talking about their work only moments earlier, to use their imagined windfall to “get out.”

Many of us have a bit of a love-hate relationship with our jobs, but the pace and intensity of high tech professional careers in Silicon Valley seems to magnify both sides of the equation. We hear the classic stories of endless seventy-hour weeks and read of people retiring by forty. All of us know people living on the thin line between overachievement and burnout, if we're not doing it ourselves. Paradoxically, I often have the feeling that many of us aren't driving ourselves so hard only because we have to, but because at some level we *want* to. While I admire anyone with the drive to succeed in their chosen career, I wonder about the price many of us pay for working so hard, and what it does to our perception of work itself.

Given my upbringing, which contains more of the “Protestant Work Ethic” than I sometimes care to admit, I tend to think “work” is good for the soul. However, I have

a hard time believing either that the immediate payoff ought to be a bigger house or a luxury car, or that the ultimate goal ought to be to escape from work entirely. I also like to think work ought to be able to coexist with community, but the pace at which we operate makes it very difficult to find time for family, let alone for our neighbors, our children's school, or our church. It is easy to fall into the trap of “I'll do that when...”, as though all the extra time we've spent pushing our careers will suddenly reappear when we finally make the big break. Even if, by some miracle, it did, what have we and our communities lost in the meantime?

Sometimes, I wonder if we have lost the sense that a career can be a journey of personal discovery and growth, and not simply a forced march to the promised land. It's simple to point a finger at “Corporate America” and bemoan the demands of living in a place where everything seems to move at hyperspeed, but I also think part of the blame must lie in each of us for buying into the game in the first place. If that's true, then acknowledging responsibility is probably our best hope. If we are, in some sense, “addicted” to work in the fast lane, then admitting this is the first step. There's no question that most of us *do* enjoy our careers on some level. The challenge is to find ways to make our work sustainable, so that we can thrive not only in it, but outside of it as well. We need to come to some sort of compromise, where we can find time for family and community and even play, not just work.

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To be successful, the first thing to do is fall in love with your work.

Sister Mary Laretta