

# You Are Your Work (and That's a Good Thing)

Think of your professional life as a journey that begins with drudgery and ends with love



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There's an exchange in the Estonian literary classic *Truth and Justice* that has always stayed with me. It's a conversation between a farmer and his son, who is

about to leave the family estate for a stint in the Imperial Russian Army. Even if he is gone for only a few years, serving in the army is no joke. Almost every village has examples of young, able men who have gone away, only to come back unable. Or who don't come back at all.

One can, therefore, sympathize with the father, who was hoping to bequeath the farm to his son. For two decades, he has worked arduously, often to the point of collapse, to turn cheap swampland into flourishing acreage. And to an extent, he's succeeded: While it's not exactly thriving, the farm yields a respectable income, even employing a few farmhands.

Despite the farm's prosperity, though, the work never stops. The father's imagination for new projects seems to expand in proportion to the farm's success. There are evermore bogs to be converted to fields of grain, roads to be paved, new houses to build, and old ones to renovate. With the old man now broken by the taxing work — at least in body, if not in spirit — it is his departing son who should propel the farm to new heights.

To the father's great anguish, the boy wants none of it and plans to leave the farm for good. Trying to reason with the aged master, he asks somewhat bluntly: "Why should they, the children, bury themselves in the marshes when it's so much easier to earn their daily bread elsewhere?" Receiving no reply from his father, he adds: "Unless it's for love, of course..."

The old man stays quiet for a long time, contemplating the sad words of his child. Finally, he mutters resignedly: "Work and sweat, then love will come."

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**I**t's a theme that we see time and time again: accomplished people continuing to tirelessly put in the hours, long after they have realized their initial ambitions, often at the expense of their relationships, well-being, and health.

We strive for success for no other reason than that we are human. We crave validation, and being a hotshot at work does the trick. We require security, and the paycheck takes care of that. We yearn for freedom, and... oh well, two out of three is good enough. (For now, at least. Once we achieve the first two, we'll surely catch up on the third, right?)

# We strive for success for no other reason than we are human.

Like most of us, Andres, the father in the Estonian story, figured as much in the beginning. As an aspiring family man, he started thinking about children just a few months into his marriage. They were to be his purpose in life, his reason for undertaking the strenuous effort of building a prosperous farm. But even as the farm grew in wealth and his many children reached adulthood, Andres never granted himself any respite to cultivate a relationship with them.

In the eyes of the son, Andres was a hypocrite. The son had never seen his father happy yet the man wanted his children to be shackled, to be held captive by the same wretched environment that was the source of their father's undoing. And in this final attempt at connection before the son left for good, the old man was daring to suggest that love comes at the tail end of work. What "love" could he possibly be referring to?

Love of family? Couldn't possibly be, for the son had seen him impose his will over the rough lands for decades, only to alienate his wife and children in the process. Love of the lands themselves? Certainly not, as love is accepting someone for who they are, not for what they could be. And Andres was never content with his fields. The strength of his vision was much too strong for that, the output of his drudgery inevitably tumbling short of his dreams.

In fact, the love that the father spoke of was for his work. It was the labor itself that he had grown to value above all else. Toil for its own sake. What he had initially figured to be a means to an end had inadvertently become the end. What is one to make of that?

A lot, actually.

Not unlike the son, we assume in our youthful restlessness that work is an impediment, a rough sea standing between us and the island of treasure we so desire. If we could, we'd rather not make the trip, not waste the best years of our lives on such drudgery. But not having riches is even worse, for without them we are not yet free, at least not to the extent we crave to be.

Most pressingly, our lack of means prohibits us from exercising our youthful spontaneity to the fullest extent. Perhaps on the third hour of bingeing skydiving videos on YouTube, we feel a sudden urge to jump out of some perfectly good planes ourselves. Perhaps our partner leaves us and we need to do something truly amazing right here and now, to shove our awesomeness in their face one last time. Whatever the specifics, we must have the freedom to jump on these opportunities with the full measure of our zeal.

## We lack the foresight to see that the journey — the work — changes us.

But we need money for that... and fast. The clock is ticking and we won't be young forever. So we pack our bags, say goodbye to our loved ones, and head off to the ship — or dare I break the spell, to the office — forced to sacrifice our present for the potential of total freedom tomorrow. At least we'll come back a rich man, free to live as we please, right?

Wrong. We won't come back at all.

We lack the foresight to see that the journey — the work — changes us. In the very beginning, our days are indeed best characterized as drudgery, for we are still lowly apprentices unable to contribute much, trusted only with trivial tasks.

But as we persist, a task that used to take days now takes mere hours. The complex software we weren't able to comprehend before suddenly makes sense. The small intricacies of our subject that were previously invisible start revealing themselves, sparking our childlike curiosity and sense of wonder. A new, fascinating world opens itself to us. Step by step, we achieve proficiency in our field. Mastery, even.

As our enthusiasm takes hold, others will also be drawn to it. We will be taken to conferences and meet-ups, introduced to the crème de la crème of our field. Wanting to live up to the expectations of this select group, we dive even deeper into our craft — so deep that it's impossible to swim back up. Being underwater for so long, the craft percolates into us. We begin to embody it.

Next thing we know, we're Linus Torvalds, onstage telling a crowd: "I don't care about you. I care about the technology." To be clear, I don't agree with everything Torvalds says, particularly not his shortsighted views on workplace diversity. But his love for his craft — and for his work — is admirable. Recall:

"Work and sweat, then love will come."

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**T**ake also Jimmy Chin, the climber-turned-director. First and foremost, his passion is crawling along vertical rock walls. Indeed, he only took up photography — with a borrowed camera, no less — to support his dirtbag lifestyle after college. "I didn't really have a sense of wanting to be an artist or a photographer," he's said. Yet, all of a sudden, he's spending two years of his life on a film that could win an Oscar. How much actual climbing do you think he did during those two years? Not a lot, it seems — most of the movie, *Free Solo*, is about its protagonist staring at the camera.

Love came.

Or, take me. Much like the young heir in the story, I grew up in a household where I was no stranger to hard labor. My father is a construction worker and I spent most of my childhood at building sites, mixing cement by hand and digging ditches for pipes. Or I worked alongside my mother at her laundry house, inhaling vaporized human excrement courtesy of her biggest client, the local hospital. It was drudgery from day one. There were no vacations, camping trips, or even picnics to remember.

Realizing my family's unfortunate predicament early on, I promised myself that I'd get out of that rut. I would free myself of the struggle my parents were accustomed to. First, I would become educated and wealthy. Then, I would spend my money on sports cars, lavish trips to foreign countries, and exciting adventures. I would support a life of leisure and comfort, the kind of frivolous existence Jay Gatsby must have fantasized about when he reached for the green light at the end of Daisy's dock.

The result of that declaration was two engineering degrees. Then a job with an actual desk, one that doesn't require a helmet nor overalls. Plus a wage several times over the national average and perpetual work, for it has inadvertently developed into a passion.

Unable to read technical articles while driving, I use public transport, not sports cars, to get to work. I'd rather go to industry conferences than on touristy sightseeing trips. I have a productive daily routine, not adventures. No leisure, only hustle.

Love came.

Perhaps this is too blunt of a message for you. You'd like to believe that you're the exception — that at some point you will quit to do your base jumps and your pilgrimages and your trips around the world. But look around you (in real life, I mean, not on social media). How many of your friends or co-workers have actually quit their jobs to go live in igloos or become globe-trotting nomads? I thought so.

Don't be the son, trying to rid yourself of toil. Don't dip yourself into your new career half-heartedly, thinking it'll just be a temporary stint before you're off to some grand adventure. It won't happen and the waste in entertaining such illusions is often appalling in retrospect. Instead, dive into your profession with unrestrained intensity. Put your emotions and ego aside for just a moment and focus solely on the work. Have the courage to trust the process.

Love will come.

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