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De Botton, Alain.

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Alain De Botton

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Career Counselling

1.

However powerful our technology and complex our corporations, the most remarkable feature of the modern working world may in the end be internal, consisting in an aspect of our mentalities: in the widely held belief that our work should make us happy. All societies have had work at their centre; ours is the first to suggest that it could be something much more than a punishment or a penance. Ours is the first to imply that we should seek to work even in the absence of a financial imperative. Our choice of occupation is held to define our identity to the extent that the most insistent question we ask of new acquaintances is not where they come from or who their parents were but what they *do*, the assumption being that the route to a meaningful existence must invariably pass through the gate of remunerative employment.

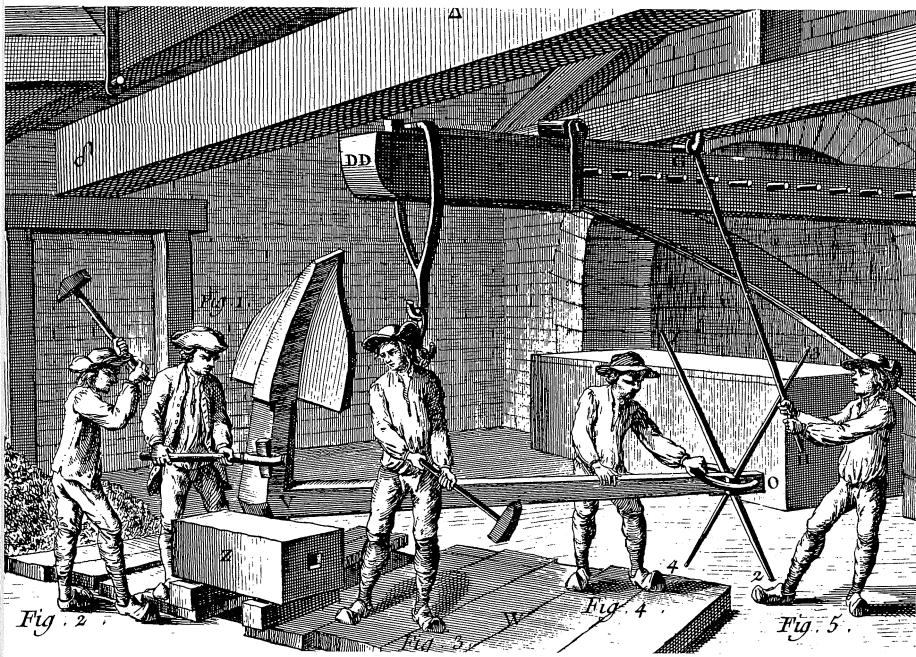
It was not always this way. In the fourth century BC, Aristotle defined an attitude that was to last more than two millennia when he referred to a structural incompatibility between satisfaction and a paid position. For the Greek philosopher, financial need placed one on a par with slaves and animals. The labour of the hands, as much as of the mercantile sides of the mind, would lead to psychological deformation. Only a private income and a life of leisure could afford citizens adequate opportunity to enjoy the higher pleasures gifted by music and philosophy.

Early Christianity appended to Aristotle's notion the still darker doctrine that the miseries of work were an appropriate and immovable means of expiating the sins of Adam. It was not until the Renaissance that new notes began to be heard. In the biographies of great artists, men like Leonardo and Michelangelo, we hear the first references to the glories of practical activity. While this re-evaluation was at first limited to artistic work and even then, only to its most

exalted examples, it came in time to encompass almost all occupations. By the middle of the eighteenth century, in a direct challenge to the Aristotelian position, Diderot and d'Alembert published their twenty-seven-volume *Encyclopédie*, filled with articles celebrating the particular genius and joy involved in baking bread, planting asparagus, operating a windmill, forging an anchor, printing a book and running a silver mine. Accompanying the text were illustrations of the tools employed to complete such tasks: among them pulleys, tongs and clamps, instruments whose precise purpose readers might not always understand, but which they could nonetheless recognise as furthering the pursuit of skilful and dignified ends. After spending a month in a needle-making workshop in Normandy, the writer Alexandre Deleyre produced perhaps the most influential article in the *Encyclopédie*, in which he respectfully described the fifteen steps required to transform a lump of metal into one of those deft and often overlooked instruments used to sew on buttons.

Purported to be a sober compendium of knowledge, the *Encyclopédie* was in truth a paean to the nobility of labour. Diderot laid bare his motives in an entry on 'Art', lambasting those who were inclined to venerate only the 'liberal' arts (Aristotle's music and philosophy) whilst ignoring their 'mechanical' equivalents (such as clock-making and silk-weaving): 'The liberal arts have sung their own praise long enough; they should now raise their voice in praise of the mechanical arts. The liberal arts must free the mechanical arts from the degradation in which these have so long been held by prejudice.'

The bourgeois thinkers of the eighteenth century thus turned Aristotle's formula on its head: satisfactions which the Greek philosopher had identified with leisure were now transposed to the sphere of work, while tasks lacking in any financial reward were drained



Here, too, possibilities for happiness:
'Forging an anchor', from Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*

of all significance and left to the haphazard attentions of decadent dilettantes. It now seemed as impossible that one could be happy and unproductive as it had once seemed unlikely that one could work and be human.

Aspects of this evolution in attitudes towards work had intriguing parallels in ideas about love. In this sphere too, the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie yoked together what was pleasurable and what was necessary. They argued that there was no inherent conflict between sexual passion and the practical demands of raising children in a family unit, and that there could hence be romance within a marriage – just as there could be enjoyment within a paid job.

Initiating developments of which we are still the heirs, the European bourgeoisie took the momentous steps of co-opting on behalf of both marriage and work the pleasures hitherto pessimistically – or perhaps realistically – confined, by aristocrats, to the subsidiary realms of the love affair and the hobby.

2.

It was with this history in mind that I became interested in meeting a career counsellor, a professional dedicated to finding ways of ensuring that work will be synonymous with fulfilment.

An internet search produced a company called Career Counselling International, whose website promised help for those facing 'troubling life decisions and occupational choices'. This authoritative claim led me to expect large and well-appointed headquarters, but the company turned out to be run from the back of an unassuming and cramped Victorian home in a run-down residential street in South London. It featured a small administrative office and a consulting room with Paul Klee prints and views of a clotted carp pond and a washing line. The only full-time employee, Robert Symons, a

fifty-five-year-old psychotherapist, had started the business twelve years before, and ran it along with his wife, June, who helped with the accounts and the marking of aptitude tests. The couple were admirably fond of some of the less popular vegetables in the English repertoire, for at most times of the day – even in the early morning – the place smelt powerfully of freshly boiled cabbage or swede. Symons had studied psychology at Bristol University, where he had come under the influence of the humanistic school of psychology which emphasised creativity and self-development. In his spare time, he had written a book entitled *The Real Me: Career as an Act of Selfhood*, which he had been trying to publish for several years.

Symons was a tall and bearded man who looked as if he could wrestle a wolf to the ground, but his physical might belied the patient manner of a priest. In another era, one imagined him as the curate of a peaceful rural parish, keeping bees and a tortoise in the garden, believing in little, but ministering with exceptional sincerity to the needs of the sick and the troubled. In the consulting room, we sat facing each other across a plate of fig rolls, for which he confessed an almost addictive fondness. So kindly were his eyes, he seemed like someone who would be open to confessions of the most unusual sort. Not even the most extreme quirk of the mind appeared liable to surprise him or elicit humiliating judgement. I harboured a confused wish for him to be my father.

Three days a week, Symons saw private clients in his house and, on the remaining two, he visited businesses around the country, advising workers about to be laid off or managers who were having difficulty shouldering their responsibilities. He also offered motivational seminars for the unemployed, psychometric testing for interviews and, from a stand at university careers fairs, sessions with graduates preparing to enter the job market.

We agreed that I should observe his working methods over a number of weeks. I would accompany him on his travels and, via a video monitor in the administrative office (with the necessary permissions in hand), observe his consultations with his clients. All he asked in return was that I should recommend him the name of an effective literary agent.

3.

Three days later, I was ensconced in a tight cupboard that served for a study, looking at a black-and-white screen showing the events unfolding in the consulting room next door, where the first client of the day had begun summing up her personal history and professional dissatisfactions with a compelling mixture of formality and honesty. There were papers and files stacked up to the ceiling all around me and, on the floor, a bag of Symons's sports equipment, emitting the strong smell of recently used gym shoes. The client's voice could be heard both through the loudspeaker on the monitor and more directly through the walls. It was one of those crystalline, perfectly enunciated English voices, the sort one might acquire growing up in Walton-upon-Thames and graduating with a First in History from Keble College, Oxford. Through a slit in the door, I could see the client's coat hanging in the hall, a rich blue cashmere garment freckled with water, along with a slim leather briefcase.

Three times the client interrupted her own anecdotes, suddenly pushing back her hair and saying, 'I'm so sorry, this must be unbearably boring', to which Symons shot back calmly, as if he had been expecting her to say this all along, 'I am here only for you'. Twenty minutes into the session, the therapist dropped his voice almost to a whisper and asked, with an avuncular warmth, what had become of the spontaneous and excited child the client must once have been.

At which, quite without warning, Carol, thirty-seven years old, a tax lawyer, in charge of a department of forty-five in an office near the Bank of England, began to sob, as Symons watched her with his kindly eyes and, outside, the neighbour's cat took a stroll around the carp pond.

After Carol had left, as Symons threw away a pile of used tissues and rearranged the cushions on the couch, he remarked that the most common and unhelpful illusion plaguing those who came to see him was the idea that they ought somehow, in the normal course of events, to have intuited – long before they had finished their degrees, started families, bought houses and risen to the top of law firms – what they should properly be doing with their lives. They were tormented by a residual notion of having through some error or stupidity on their part missed out on their true 'calling'.

This curious and unfortunate term had first come into circulation in a Christian context during the medieval period, in reference to people's abrupt encounter with an imperative to devote themselves to Jesus' teachings. But Symons maintained that a secularised version of this notion had survived even into the modern age, where it was prone to torture us with an expectation that the meaning of our lives might at some point be revealed to us in a ready-made and decisive form, which would in turn render us permanently immune to feelings of confusion, envy and regret.

Symons preferred a quote from *Motivation and Personality*, by the psychologist Abraham Maslow, which he had pinned up above the toilet: 'It isn't normal to know what we want. It is a rare and difficult psychological achievement.'

4.

When Carol returned the following week, she was dressed in a green skirt and t-shirt and seemed a decade younger. Symons apologised for the smell in the room (his wife was making puréed swede with cheesy crust) and suggested that she submit to a small written exercise. He put in front of her three sheets of blank paper headed 'Things that I Like', and gave her ten minutes to make a list of everything which came into her head, from the grand to the seemingly inconsequential, while he went off to get them some lemon-and-ginger tea, having always resisted the Freudian injunction against overfamiliarity between therapist and client.

Carol filled in her sheets, often breaking off to look out of the window. She had the strong, almost masculine beauty one might have associated with the wife of a middle-ranking colonial administrator in Uganda in the 1920s.

Symons knew that it was hopeless to try to guide people towards more fulfilling vocations simply by discussing with them directly what they might like to do. Concerns about money and status would long ago have extinguished most clients' ability to think authentically about their options. He preferred for them to return to first principles and free-associate around clusters of concerns that delighted and excited them, without attempting to settle upon them anything as rigid as the frame of a career.

Symons had a metaphor he favoured: in searching for their aptitudes, his clients were to act like treasure hunters passing over the ground with metal detectors, listening out for what he called beeps of joy. A man might get his first intimation that his real interest lay in poetry not by hearing the command of a holy voice as he paged through a book of verse, but from a beep he experienced at the sight of mist over a quiet valley seen from the top of an edge-of-

town carpark. Or a politician, long before she belonged to any party or had any profound understanding of statecraft, might register a telling signal when successfully healing a rift between two members of her family.

As it happened, Carol's beeps turned out to be perplexingly varied. Her reveries about what she liked included visiting old churches, giving presents, making things neat, eating in a fish restaurant set up by a friend in Margate, buying old chairs and reading blogs about economics on the internet.

Carol and Symons devoted several sessions to interpreting the list, bringing to the task some of the detachment of a pair of archaeologists assigned to study the rubble of an ancient town. The more they talked about the fish restaurant, the clearer it became that it wasn't the place, in itself, that held any special appeal for Carol; what impressed her was the example of someone who had taken the risk to build a business around a personal interest. Symons took from this exchange the word *passion,* which he penned on a whiteboard affixed to the back of the door. As for Carol's love of economics blogs, this was with time revealed to be anchored around an enthusiasm for just one particular example dealing with issues of social entrepreneurship. Symons wrote *altruism and business* on the board.

Counsellor and client now turned their focus to envy. Symons was a particular admirer of this feeling, and lamented the way that its useful role in alerting us to our possibilities was too often censored out of priggish moralism. Without envy, there could be no recognition of one's desires. So Symons gave Carol another ten-minute slot to list everyone she most regularly envied – adding on his way out of the room that he didn't care for niceness and that if there were not at least two names of close colleagues or friends

on her piece of paper, he would know that she had been evasively sentimental.

Watching these sessions on closed circuit television, I came to feel that what was unfolding in the damp room next door was of historical significance. Symons had devoted his life to paying an exceptional degree of attention to the most minor feelings of another person. After millennia in which action had been privileged over reflection, and intelligence primarily restricted to the discussion of arid abstract ideas, an ordinary human's everyday confusions had at last found a forum in which they were being accorded the methodical consideration they deserved. Among all the other, better-established businesses catering to elements far down our hierarchy of needs – businesses offering assistance with gardening and cleaning, accountancy and computers – here, finally, was an enterprise devoted to the interpretation of the critical, yet troublingly indistinct, radio-transmissions of the psyche.

Above Symons's desk was a photograph of Michelangelo's unfinished sculpture entitled *'Atlas' Slave,* from the collection of the Accademia Gallery in Florence. In this block of stone, arrested midway on its journey from raw material to museum piece, an as-yet-headless human figure is seen struggling to emerge from a chunk of marble. The partially completed object appealed to Symons as a metaphor for what he believed that career counselling might do for all of us: in Nietzsche's words, help us to *become* who we *are.*

5.

A month into my time with him, Symons asked if I might like to follow him on a working trip to the north of England. Our first stop would be Newcastle, where he had reserved a space at a university's careers fair. Two thousand students were expected to wander

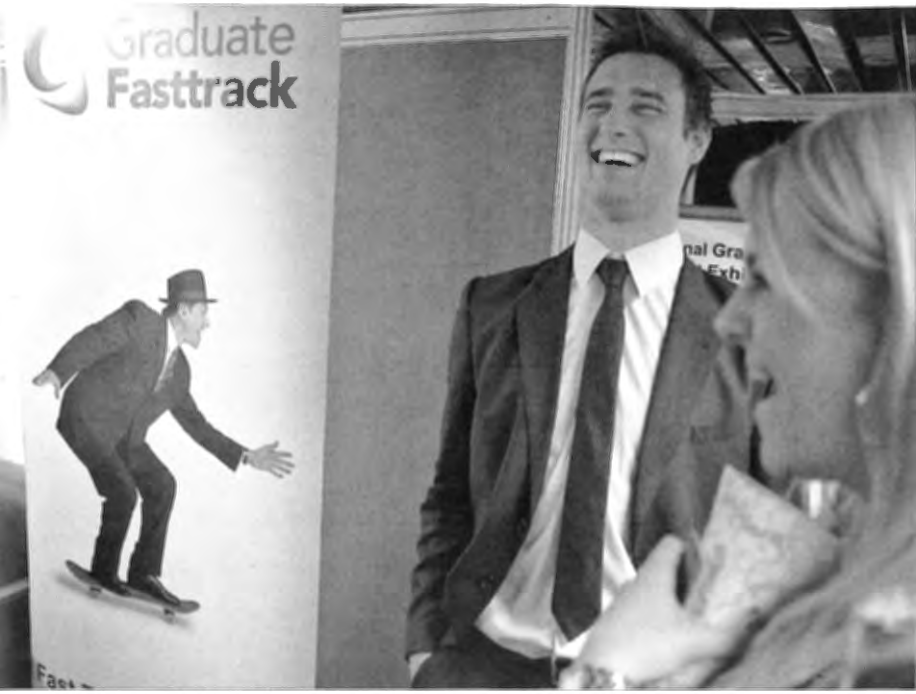
through a Victorian hall filled with employers from every sector of the economy and Symons would be offering half-hour consultations, with the option of subsequent discussions over the telephone.

The train from London was packed, so the ticket collector – taking pity on us as we stood in the corridor with large bags holding the components of Symons's booth – let us into the first-class compartment, where we sat in deep velour-covered armchairs and were served a breakfast of sausages and eggs. Far from cheering Symons up, however, the unanticipated luxury seemed to bring out a melancholic side in him which I had not previously seen. As the remains of industrial England passed by outside the window, he brooded over the debased state of modern culture and manners. Then, shifting his focus, he spoke of how few people were willing to invest in his services, and how few of those engaged him for more than a single introductory session or opted for anything other than his test-based methods of counselling, on the basis of their cost and speed. Most Britons were resigned to spending their entire adult lives working at jobs chosen for them by their unthinking sixteen-year-old selves, he concluded, while across the aisle, in apparent confirmation of this analysis, a teenage girl languidly leafed through the celebrity pages of *Bella* magazine.

We reached the careers fair just as the doors were being opened, and hurried to assemble our stand. Students streamed in, often in high spirits, travelling in gangs and regularly erupting with threatening guffaws. Their obvious good health and, in some cases, beauty served to suggest that knowledge and experience might not, in the end, be very valuable commodities to take refuge in.

A few passers-by picked up leaflets as they brushed past the stand, but most moved on in a hurry, headed for a defence contractor and a supermarket chain across the way. An unprofitable and


CV
Clinic


Graduate
Fasttrack

wearing day seemed to be confirmed when, in the late afternoon, Symons went through a pile of introductory questionnaires that he had handed out only to discover that one of them had been filled in by Søren Kierkegaard. In the box headed 'What I would like to achieve in my career', the nascent comic had written, 'To overturn the hegemony of pseudo-Christian values and the hypocrisy of the established Danish Church'.

We retreated that evening to a joyless Ibis hotel where the dining room had closed due to a flood and, after a cheese sandwich from a petrol station, turned in early.

Matters began to look up the next day, however, when we went to Middlesbrough to visit a windscreen repair company which was in the process of laying off twenty-five middle managers. The bosses had asked Symons to conduct a seminar entitled 'Self-Confidence', during which he would lead the redundant workers through a number of exercises designed to help them to imagine an adequate future for themselves. In the morning session, he projected some slides onto a screen: *I can do anything if I put my mind to it. I can be strong and move mountains. I can set myself goals and achieve them. Nothing I have done so far is an indication of the powers that are within me.* These were supplemented by a booklet Symons handed out, containing extracts from the biographies of famous self-made men and women. On the fly-leaf was a quote from Leon Battista Alberti: *A man can do all things if he will.*

None of this was easy to watch, and several times I found myself looking awkwardly out of the window at the cafeteria below. I was particularly troubled to hear one participant repeating, under Symons's direction: *I am the author of my own story.* In the bathroom to which I repaired for mental relief, I tried to analyse my discomfort, and yet in so doing, began to be suspicious of my own stance.

I realised that Symons's talk unsettled me because it reflected a disturbing but ultimately unavoidable truth about achievement in the modern world. In older, more hierarchical societies, an individual's fate had largely been decided by the accidents of birth; the difference between success and failure had not hung on a proficiency with the declaration *I can move mountains.*

However, in the meritocratic, socially mobile modern world, one's status might now well be determined by one's confidence, imagination and ability to convince others of one's due – a possibility of advancement which shone a less flattering light on philosophies of stoicism and resignation. It seemed that one might squander one's life chances because of a high-handed disdain for books with titles such as *The Will to Succeed*, believing that one was above their shrill slogans of encouragement. One might be doomed not by a lack of talent, but by a species of pessimistic pride.

After lunch, Symons took his managers back into the lecture room and offered them a chance to share their hopes for the future, the idea being that a public revelation of this kind would stand as a promise to themselves which would be the harder to break when their confidence wavered. An employee in her early forties, who had been with the company for twenty years, spoke of her ambition to open a tea shop in the village where she had grown up. So strong was her enthusiasm, and so detailed were her plans (the walls were to be hung with pictures of the young Shirley Temple), that it was almost impossible not to feel stirred. I *can* move mountains, she concluded by saying, and returned to her seat, to the applause of all the participants.

I felt my eyes fill. I was reminded that whatever over-cerebral understanding we may sometimes apply to our functioning, we nevertheless retain some humblingly simple needs, among them a prodigious and steady hunger for support and love. It was to the

archaic part of our personalities that Symons's motivational exercises appealed, the side which requires neither eloquence nor complex logic and which will forgive ungainly sentences so long as they are imbued with the necessary, redemptive doses of hope.

Towards the end of the day, Symons engaged his audience in a discussion about what he called the voices of despair, internalised attitudes emphasising the chances of failure. Many of the participants traced such voices back to an unhelpful parent or a disapproving teacher, someone who, decades before, had subjected them to criticism or neglect. One after another, grown men and women rose to their feet to recount how, when they were barely the height of a door handle, they had suffered some grievous injury to their self-image: a maths teacher had berated them for their poor algebra skills, or a father had said that it was their sister who was good at art and that they should stick to sport instead.

The evidence suggested that the forming of an individual in its early years was as sensitive and important a task as the correct casting of a skyscraper's foundations and that the slightest impurity introduced at a primary stage could possess a tyrannical power to unbalance a human animal until its dying days. To continue to deny the significance of barely perceptible childhood abuses was to manifest the same robust and foolhardy common-sense which had once led our ancestors to scoff at the notion that there might be deadly colonies of microorganisms thriving in drops of saliva no larger than pinheads.

Seen from this perspective, the weight accorded to ideas of nurture and to the development of self-esteem in theories of modern education no longer seemed like a sign that our societies had gone mad or soft. On the contrary, this emphasis was as finely attuned to the demands of contemporary working life as instruction in stoicism and physical bravery had been to the exigencies of ancient times.

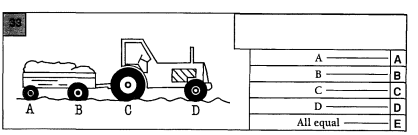
It owed its existence less to kindness than to practical necessity. Like the rearing methods of every age, it was intended to ensure that the young would be granted the optimal chances of survival in a hostile environment.

6.

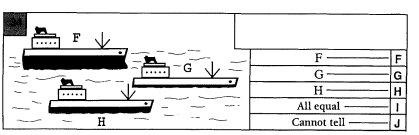
A few weeks after we returned from the north, I travelled with Symons to an office in central London, where he had been commissioned by an American bank to put some job applicants through a morning's worth of tests. Symons had hoped that this process could be combined with a more informative round of face-to-face interviews, but the bank turned out not to want to expend the requisite time and resources. The tests would be scored overnight and a decision taken on hiring the following day.

Symons's subjects devoted the bulk of their session to filling out the Morrisby Personality Profile, the most respected and widely used of all aptitude questionnaires. Never far from doubting the wisdom of my own career choice, I joined the candidates in the hope of learning more about my working psyche. I searched for exceptions within lists of words and tried to solve visual puzzles and analogies such as '*Heavy* is to *light* as *a) wide b) day c) jump* is to *d) brick e) narrow f) house*'.

Which wheel turns the fastest when the tractor moves?



Which of these identical ships have the heaviest load?



Two days later, my test results came back from Symons's office in an exclusively bound folder designed to assert the importance of their conclusions. Held up against the subtletly of the psychological exchanges I had observed between Symons and Carol (who had since handed in her resignation from her law firm and applied for a managerial post with a housing charity), the report felt like it had been written by a computer. 'The candidate displays average abilities which would render him well-suited to a range of middle-ranking administrative and commercial posts', the document began, before it singled out a particular talent for marketing and a weakness with numbers. 'His future may lie in one of the following fields: medical diagnostics, oil and gas exploration or the leisure industry'.

I recognised my desire to submit to the report's conclusions in the hope of quelling my doubts about my future. At the same time, the report failed to inspire any real degree of confidence and indeed, the more I dwelt on it, the more it seemed to signal some of the limits of career counselling as a whole. I thought again about the smells of cabbage and swede in Symons's office. It struck me as strange and regrettable that in our society something as prospectively life-altering as the determination of a person's vocation had for the most part been abandoned to marginalised therapists practising their trade from garden extensions. What should have been one of the most admired professions on earth was struggling to attain the status open to a travel agent.

But perhaps this neglect was only an appropriate reflection of how little therapists can in the end make sense of human nature. An understandable hunger for answers from potential clients tempts many of them to overpromise, like creative writing teachers who, out of greed or sentimentality, sometimes imply that all of their students could one day produce worthwhile literature, rather

than frankly acknowledging the troubling truth, so anathema to a democratic society, that the great writer, like the contented worker, remains an erratic and anomalous event, no less immune to the methods of factory farming than a truffle.

The true range of obstacles in the way of unlocking our potential was more accurately acknowledged by the German sociologist Max Weber when, in his essay 'Science as a Vocation' (1918), he described Goethe as an example of the sort of creative and healthy personality 'who appears only once in a thousand years'.

For the rest of history, for most of us, our bright promise will always fall short of being actualised; it will never earn us bountiful sums of money or beget exemplary objects or organisations. It will remain no more than a hope carried over from childhood, or a dream entertained as we drive along the motorway and feel our plans hovering above a wide horizon. Extraordinary resilience, intelligence and good fortune are needed to redraw the map of our reality, while on either side of the summits of greatness are arrayed the endless foothills populated by the tortured celibates of achievement.

Most of us stand poised at the edge of brilliance, haunted by the knowledge of our proximity, yet still demonstrably on the wrong side of the line, our dealings with reality undermined by a range of minor yet critical psychological flaws (a little too much optimism, an unprocessed rebelliousness, a fatal impatience or sentimentality). We are like an exquisite high-speed aircraft which for lack of a tiny part is left stranded beside the runway, rendered slower than a tractor or a bicycle.

I left Symons's company newly aware of the unthinking cruelty discreetly coiled within the magnanimous bourgeois assurance that everyone can discover happiness through work and love. It isn't that these two entities are invariably incapable of delivering fulfilment,

only that they almost never do so. And when an exception is misrepresented as a rule, our individual misfortunes, instead of seeming to us quasi-inevitable aspects of life, will weigh down on us like particular curses. In denying the natural place reserved for longing and error in the human lot, the bourgeois ideology denies us the possibility of collective consolation for our fractious marriages and our unexploited ambitions, and condemns us instead to solitary feelings of shame and persecution for having stubbornly failed to become who we are.

7.

In the end, twelve literary agents read Symons's manuscript. All replied politely and with encouragement. *The Real Me: Career as an Act of Selfhood* remains without a publisher.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