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Defining the Reward (draft)
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Disclaimer: I am not advertising for Lyft. I did not get paid to write this. I am using my experience to make a point. Thank you.

A common discussion I have with passengers is what I get paid per hour as a Lyft driver. The quick and easy answer is "anywhere from $10.00 to $30.00 per hour, with most days averaging $15.00". However, there is also a more complicated answer because I adhere to this concept called "defining the reward". Given some experience you have in life, *you* decide what you get out of it and what you do with it.

One of the biggest issues we face as millennials are rising college costs and student debt. Of course, our financial investment into higher education should theoretically return something higher in terms of a high-paying job or lucrative career. And while it does pay out over the long-term that is our lifetimes, college does not appear to pay out in the short-term. But I would like to argue that while this is true in terms of money, there is more of a grey area when it comes to life experience. There is much more variability in what one gets out of college depending on the individual's definition of his or her reward. And the slightly weird thing is that one can leverage this non-monetary definition of a reward towards a financial goal. It is not as simple as "money in, money out."

Coming out of college, I got a full-time job right away as a product development research assistant at a biotech company. It paid reasonably, and I had the freedom to be a typical young adult. I wanted to do something fun on the side, so I started driving for Lyft. I love casual driving, drinking coffee, and listening to music – all at the same time. I also love talking to people in general. And if you love doing something, why not do it?

So, I had two jobs for a couple months, the full-time lab job looking more glamorous on paper. But over time, I noticed that I was not feeling fulfilled in terms of my career or even as a human being. With the product testing we were doing, there was very little left to the imagination, and I was not able to be myself. I love constantly exchanging knowledge, maintaining genuine relationships with people, and pursuing big ideas. I was not free to pursue knowledge as a goal. I saw myself as a better fit in a research and engineering type role where I could leverage my artistic side.

Where does "defining the reward" play into all this? Well, if I were to define my reward in terms of money, I received a higher reward for my full-time job than as a Lyft driver. But I defined my reward in terms of things that were more valuable than money, such as learning the life story of a stranger, or receiving life advice, or encouraging someone when they've had a bad day, then Lyft driving obviously wins, and I am not getting much of a reward from the lab job.

With all the conversations I had with my passengers, I realized that I had to stay true to who I was as a person. I genuinely love people. I let my emotions guide me. I love music. I have a deep passion for the field of reinforcement learning. I love driving despite the traffic. I drink a lot of coffee. I can have shallow and deep conversations with people. I love eating food. I love to travel and explore. Knowing all of this, I made the decision to quit the full-time job; develop my interests in reinforcement learning, engineering, and music; and continue connecting with people through small gigs such as Lyft and Starbucks. My personal rewards are anything related to RL, engineering, music, and people (and mostly importantly, food). If I can stay true to those four (or

five) elements, then I am good to go. It does not end with what I receive from my experiences, but how I can transform those into something better. Using RL and engineering, we can build robots for assisting the elderly or for helping nurses in hospitals. The music that I make can move the emotions of someone who needed an outlet, while food and people are experiences that automatically build on themselves.

This is why I think college was worth far, far more than my parents and I paid in dollars for it. I defined my rewards in terms of experiencing what I loved to do (piano and music, hanging out and eating with people, my RL senior design project, bioengineering) instead of money. And once you free yourself from defining money as a reward, then you know what "priceless" really means.