

# A peculiar kind of loneliness

**Ka Wai Cheung, November 2023**

I am suffering from a peculiar kind of loneliness these days. It has nothing to do with people. I have a great support system around me. A loving family on both sides. Two great kids. Pains-in-the-asses sometimes but aren't the best ones that way?

It's something else.

A loneliness of purpose.

Purpose is a concept that's only there when it's gone isn't it? The hustle. The fire in your belly. Because there was a business you were trying to build, a championship you were trying to win, a team you were trying to make, a thing you were trying to learn, a person you were trying to win over. When there is nothing in particular left, that missing chunk becomes the purpose you didn't know you had.

This, of course, is why many very wealthy people, who can have whatever life they would like to pursue here on forward, decide to climb up places one should not be climbing up and jump off places one should not be jumping off. Reducing purpose's goal to a fistfight with physics.

In this respect, I think that any child's greatest purpose—once they've been fed and nurtured—is to make their parents feel proud of them. This is why a parent's presence is so important. *You* give your child a sense of purpose. So one way to

think about parenting is to create a relationship with them such that they both want us to be proud of their achievements and know when we are.

There are many routes to create that sense of purpose in our kids, with each kid perhaps gravitating toward one method more than another. This is probably why parenting is not a rinse-and-repeat process. Each child connects with you differently, and if you just don't screw it up, they just might want to make you proud. Some person much smarter than me with a PhD at the end of their name has surely written a book or two about this topic. Or, like me, you can just go with your gut.

I feel like I've succeeded with Andrew thus far because he now more frequently asks if I am proud of him for doing certain things. But, of course, I also have this increasing dread that somehow I've now inundated my son with a do-good instinct of just wanting to appease me out of fear, guilt, or shame.

In past generations, this was the only way. Fear, guilt, and shame probably gave the world printing, pasta, and the compass. *"Mom, ya proud of me yet? I just invented paper!"* But this is modern day and like taking Advil, you want enough of a dosage of these feelings to get them to the point of wanting to do good for you but have the effects of the drug wear away after a certain amount of time has passed so they can continue their mission on their own volition.

Back to us though. I haven't climbed to the peak of the software profession in the way most people would define the peak. I've made a good amount of money from what I do, but not to the extent where I can say I am "living comfortably" or "did well" from a past venture. So, the fire to climb that financial peak gave me the purpose I needed for years.

But, doing something for the pot of gold alone can only fuel you for so long. Some longer than others. For me, probably about a decade. By the time I reached my early thirties, I came to the realization that I would be OK if I never got to put my arm around my future child to say, “I want you to know that your dad...he did well” while dropping the keys to an Aston Martin on her sixteenth birthday. Not the kind of kids I want to raise anyways.

More importantly, I came to the realization that I actually love what I do. Truly. Other people enjoy creating communities, connections, companies...but I've found my greatest joy in creating things. Specifically making software and writing books. I love the feeling of good craftsmanship. For a long while, I felt like I solved the ultimate problem of first-world residents—I had fulfilled the old adage “do what you love.” Done. I peaked in other ways.

What I've been feeling recently is an odd relationship with my own work. You know how they say the opposite of love is not hate but indifference? I think this is true. I love my work but that means, on a dime, I can hate it. The absolute stress of maintaining a system that I've built with such pride and passion is also the thing I absolutely hate about the work.

If you maintain a piece of web software, the things you worry the most about are issues of security and performance. Is there someone out there trying to hack into the app? How am I going to keep this engine running smoothly as the system grows in popularity?

I hate these worries because I love the work. These worries have grown larger in my head because the work isn't paying off to the level I want it to anymore. And working largely alone means you can do a really good, herculean job at your craft and no one is paying attention. My narcissistic needs are starting to get the better

of me and the answer lately has changed from the answer I gave for all the years up to this point. It is no longer to push harder.

At times, it seems like the only way out is to foster a disingenuous indifference. If I stop caring (or pretend to stop caring) about the work, then these things I hate are reduced to mere annoyances. But even if I can feign indifference to the point where I believe it, I've now lost my purpose. A vicious cycle that has cornered me into this peculiar kind of loneliness.

There has to be reciprocation too. You can love to do something and do it for a long time but at some point you'd like to see the results of your hard work surface. Narcissism runs on a spectrum and we all need some dosage of it. Even if you claim to be a complete altruist, don't you want *some* acknowledgement that you're not doing it for the acknowledgement?

We all feel some level of narcissistic need in our work. That the effort we are putting in is to something meaningful and deserving of recognition. But if we are lucky enough to receive the kind of acknowledgement that we think we deserve, many of us just want more of it. Steve Jobs needed the iPad after the iPhone. A customer service rep needs the 30-years-of-service plaque after the 25-years-of-service plaque. Tom Brady will surely come back another year.

This is where you can quit. Storm out of the office. Start anew. But at 44, the feeling of starting anew again doesn't hit me in the same way it hit at 25. *I don't want to start over.*

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I feel fortunate to have been in a line of work that was still discovering itself when I began. I came of age at the same time the internet came of age. Sure, the technical underpinnings were already there for decades and some small faction of nerds were using early BBS systems, but it wasn't until the late 1990s when the internet started to feel ubiquitous.

The World Wide Web was the Wild Wild West. There was a thrill of the chase—and we weren't really sure what we were chasing. A new way to design things. New ways to use a medium. New ways of living. I can remember the first time I instant messaged my high school friend from my college dorm room; We called each other on the phone to confirm we were really seeing each other's messages on our laptops in real time. It felt like magic.

Working on the internet was a constant form of discovery and a way to discover yourself. Much of what I learned was from pure inspection—opening up “View Source” on a webpage—or by picking up a 500 page book on Active Server Pages or SQL to read just the 20 key pages. We were all learning and making it up on the fly. A rhythmic cadence. A problem. A breakthrough. A feeling of surprising yourself. I surprised myself a thousand times during those early years.

I think I've mastered my craft. I don't mean to sound overly egotistical but I've mastered it in my own way. Mastery of an art form comes, I believe, when you stop surprising yourself—even when you continue to do surprising things. Breakthroughs start to feel commonplace, as if your job is the act of breaking through. And once anything starts to feel like a job, what was once joy now becomes expectation, and expectation will eventually (a few years or a few decades) lead to disappointment.

Disappointment comes in two forms though. First, the kind in which certain things start to get harder to accomplish because you're older and you carry all the cargo of age and the responsibilities that come with age (children being the primary one). Second, the kind I alluded to earlier. You still make breakthroughs, but it's just not that exciting anymore.

It's at this point that I began to realize my most important critic was myself. If I can no longer impress myself, it sure is hard to keep going. Even when someone else compliments you, for whatever reason, it feels like a platitude unless you can genuinely make the same compliment to yourself.

How I've gone about building software is unlike how most others have—a very stripped down kind of creation that disregards most processes others believe are essential. Most of this is a byproduct of the fact that I work largely by myself. And there's a certain danger in getting older and doing things by yourself. You get increasingly stuck in your ways. You grow apart from the pack you once were running with. And running alone gets both dull and a little scary.

Another option is to do *other things*. I started to write about topics outside of software and apparently am continuing to do so at this very moment. Others at this point in their lives reconnect with (or start on) new physical endeavors. What starts as a ten-minute run on a treadmill turns, a year later, into finishing their first 5k, 10k, or marathon. We of the middle to upper-middle class brackets are running, swimming, and cycling our way to find purpose because well, climbing Mt. Everest is both expensive and too literal.

My friend Ian once decided to draw a timeline of his personal happiness with the things that he considered important ventures in his life. He came away with one clear finding: His satisfaction declined based on the amount of things he was

juggling in life. When he decided too many things were important, he wasn't as happy. When he swept away things and focused on just a couple, he generally became more content.

So maybe it's not starting over, and maybe it's not adding on, as much as it is *closing up*. You can say that you accomplished what you came to do and anything else that happens after this is pure gravy. You succeeded—perhaps not in all the ways you thought you might.

Closing up—like an Irish goodbye—also means giving yourself the permission to leave the room when nobody's watching. I used to have this mental habit (a need really). Anytime I experienced something on the web that felt a little annoying, my mind would immediately tumble down creation's road. How could I build something to solve this problem? What would the design look like? How would I model the data? What were the interesting bits of business logic to solve? Every pain point was an opportunity to think of something new.

I find myself doing less of that recently. The urge to create something (even if just for a few minutes of mental brush stroking) has faded. I often think about how someone is already out there, with the fire I once had, who will figure this out and make it something great. What once felt like a lost opportunity now feels like someone else's to be had.

I am coming to terms with wrapping a bow on things and saying I accomplished. It doesn't have to be a dramatic exit stage left, just a mental sticky note. Moving ahead to the next part of my life's purpose with a clearer delineation of the past, even if, for awhile, it is just a mental delineation. I have a suspicion these acts come more rapidly the older we get.