How to Do What You Love

January 2006To do something well you have to like it. That idea is not exactly  
novel. We've got it down to four words: "Do what you love." But  
it's not enough just to tell people that. Doing what you love is  
complicated.The very idea is foreign to what most of us learn as kids. When I  
was a kid, it seemed as if work and fun were opposites by definition.  
Life had two states: some of the time adults were making you do  
things, and that was called work; the rest of the time you could  
do what you wanted, and that was called playing. Occasionally the  
things adults made you do were fun, just as, occasionally, playing  
wasn't — for example, if you fell and hurt yourself. But except  
for these few anomalous cases, work was pretty much defined as  
not-fun.And it did not seem to be an accident. School, it was implied, was  
tedious because it was preparation for grownup work.The world then was divided into two groups, grownups and kids.  
Grownups, like some kind of cursed race, had to work. Kids didn't,  
but they did have to go to school, which was a dilute version of  
work meant to prepare us for the real thing. Much as we disliked  
school, the grownups all agreed that grownup work was worse, and  
that we had it easy.Teachers in particular all seemed to believe implicitly that work  
was not fun. Which is not surprising: work wasn't fun for most of  
them. Why did we have to memorize state capitals instead of playing  
dodgeball? For the same reason they had to watch over a bunch of  
kids instead of lying on a beach. You couldn't just do what you  
wanted.I'm not saying we should let little kids do whatever they want.  
They may have to be made to work on certain things. But if we make  
kids work on dull stuff, it might be wise to tell them that tediousness  
is not the defining quality of work, and indeed that the reason  
they have to work on dull stuff now is so they can work on more  
interesting stuff later.  
[1]Once, when I was about 9 or 10, my father told me I could be whatever  
I wanted when I grew up, so long as I enjoyed it. I remember that  
precisely because it seemed so anomalous. It was like being told  
to use dry water. Whatever I thought he meant, I didn't think he  
meant work could literally be fun — fun like playing. It  
took me years to grasp that.JobsBy high school, the prospect of an actual job was on the horizon.  
Adults would sometimes come to speak to us about their work, or we  
would go to see them at work. It was always understood that they  
enjoyed what they did. In retrospect I think one may have: the  
private jet pilot. But I don't think the bank manager really did.The main reason they all acted as if they enjoyed their work was  
presumably the upper-middle class convention that you're supposed  
to. It would not merely be bad for your career to say that you  
despised your job, but a social faux-pas.Why is it conventional to pretend to like what you do? The first  
sentence of this essay explains that. If you have to like something  
to do it well, then the most successful people will all like what  
they do. That's where the upper-middle class tradition comes from.  
Just as houses all over America are full of   
chairs  
that are, without  
the owners even knowing it, nth-degree imitations of chairs designed  
250 years ago for French kings, conventional attitudes about work  
are, without the owners even knowing it, nth-degree imitations of  
the attitudes of people who've done great things.What a recipe for alienation. By the time they reach an age to  
think about what they'd like to do, most kids have been thoroughly  
misled about the idea of loving one's work. School has trained  
them to regard work as an unpleasant duty. Having a job is said  
to be even more onerous than schoolwork. And yet all the adults  
claim to like what they do. You can't blame kids for thinking "I  
am not like these people; I am not suited to this world."Actually they've been told three lies: the stuff they've been taught  
to regard as work in school is not real work; grownup work is not  
(necessarily) worse than schoolwork; and many of the adults around  
them are lying when they say they like what they do.The most dangerous liars can be the kids' own parents. If you take  
a boring job to give your family a high standard of living, as so  
many people do, you risk infecting your kids with the idea that  
work is boring.   
[2]  
Maybe it would be better for kids in this one  
case if parents were not so unselfish. A parent who set an example  
of loving their work might help their kids more than an expensive  
house.  
[3]It was not till I was in college that the idea of work finally broke  
free from the idea of making a living. Then the important question  
became not how to make money, but what to work on. Ideally these  
coincided, but some spectacular boundary cases (like Einstein in  
the patent office) proved they weren't identical.The definition of work was now to make some original contribution  
to the world, and in the process not to starve. But after the habit  
of so many years my idea of work still included a large component  
of pain. Work still seemed to require discipline, because only  
hard problems yielded grand results, and hard problems couldn't  
literally be fun. Surely one had to force oneself to work on them.If you think something's supposed to hurt, you're less likely to  
notice if you're doing it wrong. That about sums up my experience  
of graduate school.BoundsHow much are you supposed to like what you do? Unless you  
know that, you don't know when to stop searching. And if, like most  
people, you underestimate it, you'll tend to stop searching too  
early. You'll end up doing something chosen for you by your parents,  
or the desire to make money, or prestige — or sheer inertia.Here's an upper bound: Do what you love doesn't mean, do what you  
would like to do most this second. Even Einstein probably  
had moments when he wanted to have a cup of coffee, but told himself  
he ought to finish what he was working on first.It used to perplex me when I read about people who liked what they  
did so much that there was nothing they'd rather do. There didn't  
seem to be any sort of work I liked that much. If I had a  
choice of (a) spending the next hour working on something or (b)  
be teleported to Rome and spend the next hour wandering about, was  
there any sort of work I'd prefer? Honestly, no.But the fact is, almost anyone would rather, at any given moment,  
float about in the Carribbean, or have sex, or eat some delicious  
food, than work on hard problems. The rule about doing what you  
love assumes a certain length of time. It doesn't mean, do what  
will make you happiest this second, but what will make you happiest  
over some longer period, like a week or a month.Unproductive pleasures pall eventually. After a while you get tired  
of lying on the beach. If you want to stay happy, you have to do  
something.As a lower bound, you have to like your work more than any unproductive  
pleasure. You have to like what you do enough that the concept of  
"spare time" seems mistaken. Which is not to say you have to spend  
all your time working. You can only work so much before you get  
tired and start to screw up. Then you want to do something else  
— even something mindless. But you don't regard this time as the  
prize and the time you spend working as the pain you endure to earn  
it.I put the lower bound there for practical reasons. If your work  
is not your favorite thing to do, you'll have terrible problems  
with procrastination. You'll have to force yourself to work, and  
when you resort to that the results are distinctly inferior.To be happy I think you have to be doing something you not only  
enjoy, but admire. You have to be able to say, at the end, wow,  
that's pretty cool. This doesn't mean you have to make something.  
If you learn how to hang glide, or to speak a foreign language  
fluently, that will be enough to make you say, for a while at least,  
wow, that's pretty cool. What there has to be is a test.So one thing that falls just short of the standard, I think, is  
reading books. Except for some books in math and the hard sciences,  
there's no test of how well you've read a book, and that's why  
merely reading books doesn't quite feel like work. You have to do  
something with what you've read to feel productive.I think the best test is one Gino Lee taught me: to try to do things  
that would make your friends say wow. But it probably wouldn't  
start to work properly till about age 22, because most people haven't  
had a big enough sample to pick friends from before then.SirensWhat you should not do, I think, is worry about the opinion of  
anyone beyond your friends. You shouldn't worry about prestige.  
Prestige is the opinion of the rest of the world. When you can ask  
the opinions of people whose judgement you respect, what does it  
add to consider the opinions of people you don't even know?   
[4]This is easy advice to give. It's hard to follow, especially when  
you're young.   
[5]  
Prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps  
even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not  
on what you like, but what you'd like to like.That's what leads people to try to write novels, for example. They  
like reading novels. They notice that people who write them win  
Nobel prizes. What could be more wonderful, they think, than to  
be a novelist? But liking the idea of being a novelist is not  
enough; you have to like the actual work of novel-writing if you're  
going to be good at it; you have to like making up elaborate lies.Prestige is just fossilized inspiration. If you do anything well  
enough, you'll make it prestigious. Plenty of things we now  
consider prestigious were anything but at first. Jazz comes to  
mind — though almost any established art form would do. So just  
do what you like, and let prestige take care of itself.Prestige is especially dangerous to the ambitious. If you want to  
make ambitious people waste their time on errands, the way to do  
it is to bait the hook with prestige. That's the recipe for getting  
people to give talks, write forewords, serve on committees, be  
department heads, and so on. It might be a good rule simply to  
avoid any prestigious task. If it didn't suck, they wouldn't have  
had to make it prestigious.Similarly, if you admire two kinds of work equally, but one is more  
prestigious, you should probably choose the other. Your opinions  
about what's admirable are always going to be slightly influenced  
by prestige, so if the two seem equal to you, you probably have  
more genuine admiration for the less prestigious one.The other big force leading people astray is money. Money by itself  
is not that dangerous. When something pays well but is regarded  
with contempt, like telemarketing, or prostitution, or personal  
injury litigation, ambitious people aren't tempted by it. That  
kind of work ends up being done by people who are "just trying to  
make a living." (Tip: avoid any field whose practitioners say  
this.) The danger is when money is combined with prestige, as in,  
say, corporate law, or medicine. A comparatively safe and prosperous  
career with some automatic baseline prestige is dangerously tempting  
to someone young, who hasn't thought much about what they really  
like.The test of whether people love what they do is whether they'd do  
it even if they weren't paid for it — even if they had to work at  
another job to make a living. How many corporate lawyers would do  
their current work if they had to do it for free, in their spare  
time, and take day jobs as waiters to support themselves?This test is especially helpful in deciding between different kinds  
of academic work, because fields vary greatly in this respect. Most  
good mathematicians would work on math even if there were no jobs  
as math professors, whereas in the departments at the other end of  
the spectrum, the availability of teaching jobs is the driver:  
people would rather be English professors than work in ad agencies,  
and publishing papers is the way you compete for such jobs. Math  
would happen without math departments, but it is the existence of  
English majors, and therefore jobs teaching them, that calls into  
being all those thousands of dreary papers about gender and identity  
in the novels of Conrad. No one does   
that   
kind of thing for fun.The advice of parents will tend to err on the side of money. It  
seems safe to say there are more undergrads who want to be novelists  
and whose parents want them to be doctors than who want to be doctors  
and whose parents want them to be novelists. The kids think their  
parents are "materialistic." Not necessarily. All parents tend to  
be more conservative for their kids than they would for themselves,  
simply because, as parents, they share risks more than rewards. If  
your eight year old son decides to climb a tall tree, or your teenage  
daughter decides to date the local bad boy, you won't get a share  
in the excitement, but if your son falls, or your daughter gets  
pregnant, you'll have to deal with the consequences.DisciplineWith such powerful forces leading us astray, it's not surprising  
we find it so hard to discover what we like to work on. Most people  
are doomed in childhood by accepting the axiom that work = pain.  
Those who escape this are nearly all lured onto the rocks by prestige  
or money. How many even discover something they love to work on?  
A few hundred thousand, perhaps, out of billions.It's hard to find work you love; it must be, if so few do. So don't  
underestimate this task. And don't feel bad if you haven't succeeded  
yet. In fact, if you admit to yourself that you're discontented,  
you're a step ahead of most people, who are still in denial. If  
you're surrounded by colleagues who claim to enjoy work that you  
find contemptible, odds are they're lying to themselves. Not  
necessarily, but probably.Although doing great work takes less discipline than people think — because the way to do great work is to find something you like so  
much that you don't have to force yourself to do it — finding  
work you love does usually require discipline. Some people are  
lucky enough to know what they want to do when they're 12, and just  
glide along as if they were on railroad tracks. But this seems the  
exception. More often people who do great things have careers with  
the trajectory of a ping-pong ball. They go to school to study A,  
drop out and get a job doing B, and then become famous for C after  
taking it up on the side.Sometimes jumping from one sort of work to another is a sign of  
energy, and sometimes it's a sign of laziness. Are you dropping  
out, or boldly carving a new path? You often can't tell yourself.  
Plenty of people who will later do great things seem to be disappointments  
early on, when they're trying to find their niche.Is there some test you can use to keep yourself honest? One is to  
try to do a good job at whatever you're doing, even if you don't  
like it. Then at least you'll know you're not using dissatisfaction  
as an excuse for being lazy. Perhaps more importantly, you'll get  
into the habit of doing things well.Another test you can use is: always produce. For example, if you  
have a day job you don't take seriously because you plan to be a  
novelist, are you producing? Are you writing pages of fiction,  
however bad? As long as you're producing, you'll know you're not  
merely using the hazy vision of the grand novel you plan to write  
one day as an opiate. The view of it will be obstructed by the all  
too palpably flawed one you're actually writing."Always produce" is also a heuristic for finding the work you love.  
If you subject yourself to that constraint, it will automatically  
push you away from things you think you're supposed to work on,  
toward things you actually like. "Always produce" will discover  
your life's work the way water, with the aid of gravity, finds the  
hole in your roof.Of course, figuring out what you like to work on doesn't mean you  
get to work on it. That's a separate question. And if you're  
ambitious you have to keep them separate: you have to make a conscious  
effort to keep your ideas about what you want from being contaminated  
by what seems possible.   
[6]It's painful to keep them apart, because it's painful to observe  
the gap between them. So most people pre-emptively lower their  
expectations. For example, if you asked random people on the street  
if they'd like to be able to draw like Leonardo, you'd find most  
would say something like "Oh, I can't draw." This is more a statement  
of intention than fact; it means, I'm not going to try. Because  
the fact is, if you took a random person off the street and somehow  
got them to work as hard as they possibly could at drawing for the  
next twenty years, they'd get surprisingly far. But it would require  
a great moral effort; it would mean staring failure in the eye every  
day for years. And so to protect themselves people say "I can't."Another related line you often hear is that not everyone can do  
work they love — that someone has to do the unpleasant jobs. Really?  
How do you make them? In the US the only mechanism for forcing  
people to do unpleasant jobs is the draft, and that hasn't been  
invoked for over 30 years. All we can do is encourage people to  
do unpleasant work, with money and prestige.If there's something people still won't do, it seems as if society  
just has to make do without. That's what happened with domestic  
servants. For millennia that was the canonical example of a job  
"someone had to do." And yet in the mid twentieth century servants  
practically disappeared in rich countries, and the rich have just  
had to do without.So while there may be some things someone has to do, there's a good  
chance anyone saying that about any particular job is mistaken.  
Most unpleasant jobs would either get automated or go undone if no  
one were willing to do them.Two RoutesThere's another sense of "not everyone can do work they love"  
that's all too true, however. One has to make a living, and it's  
hard to get paid for doing work you love. There are two routes to  
that destination:  
  
 The organic route: as you become more eminent, gradually to  
 increase the parts of your job that you like at the expense of  
 those you don't.The two-job route: to work at things you don't like to get money  
 to work on things you do.  
  
The organic route is more common. It happens naturally to anyone  
who does good work. A young architect has to take whatever work  
he can get, but if he does well he'll gradually be in a position  
to pick and choose among projects. The disadvantage of this route  
is that it's slow and uncertain. Even tenure is not real freedom.The two-job route has several variants depending on how long you  
work for money at a time. At one extreme is the "day job," where  
you work regular hours at one job to make money, and work on what  
you love in your spare time. At the other extreme you work at  
something till you make enough not to   
have to work for money again.The two-job route is less common than the organic route, because  
it requires a deliberate choice. It's also more dangerous. Life  
tends to get more expensive as you get older, so it's easy to get  
sucked into working longer than you expected at the money job.  
Worse still, anything you work on changes you. If you work too  
long on tedious stuff, it will rot your brain. And the best paying  
jobs are most dangerous, because they require your full attention.The advantage of the two-job route is that it lets you jump over  
obstacles. The landscape of possible jobs isn't flat; there are  
walls of varying heights between different kinds of work.   
[7]  
The trick of maximizing the parts of your job that you like can get you  
from architecture to product design, but not, probably, to music.  
If you make money doing one thing and then work on another, you  
have more freedom of choice.Which route should you take? That depends on how sure you are of  
what you want to do, how good you are at taking orders, how much  
risk you can stand, and the odds that anyone will pay (in your  
lifetime) for what you want to do. If you're sure of the general  
area you want to work in and it's something people are likely to  
pay you for, then you should probably take the organic route. But  
if you don't know what you want to work on, or don't like to take  
orders, you may want to take the two-job route, if you can stand  
the risk.Don't decide too soon. Kids who know early what they want to do  
seem impressive, as if they got the answer to some math question  
before the other kids. They have an answer, certainly, but odds  
are it's wrong.A friend of mine who is a quite successful doctor complains constantly  
about her job. When people applying to medical school ask her for  
advice, she wants to shake them and yell "Don't do it!" (But she  
never does.) How did she get into this fix? In high school she  
already wanted to be a doctor. And she is so ambitious and determined  
that she overcame every obstacle along the way — including,  
unfortunately, not liking it.Now she has a life chosen for her by a high-school kid.When you're young, you're given the impression that you'll get  
enough information to make each choice before you need to make it.  
But this is certainly not so with work. When you're deciding what  
to do, you have to operate on ridiculously incomplete information.  
Even in college you get little idea what various types of work are  
like. At best you may have a couple internships, but not all jobs  
offer internships, and those that do don't teach you much more about  
the work than being a batboy teaches you about playing baseball.In the design of lives, as in the design of most other things, you  
get better results if you use flexible media. So unless you're  
fairly sure what you want to do, your best bet may be to choose a  
type of work that could turn into either an organic or two-job  
career. That was probably part of the reason I chose computers.  
You can be a professor, or make a lot of money, or morph it into  
any number of other kinds of work.It's also wise, early on, to seek jobs that let you do many different  
things, so you can learn faster what various kinds of work are like.  
Conversely, the extreme version of the two-job route is dangerous  
because it teaches you so little about what you like. If you work  
hard at being a bond trader for ten years, thinking that you'll  
quit and write novels when you have enough money, what happens when  
you quit and then discover that you don't actually like writing  
novels?Most people would say, I'd take that problem. Give me a million  
dollars and I'll figure out what to do. But it's harder than it  
looks. Constraints give your life shape. Remove them and most  
people have no idea what to do: look at what happens to those who  
win lotteries or inherit money. Much as everyone thinks they want  
financial security, the happiest people are not those who have it,  
but those who like what they do. So a plan that promises freedom  
at the expense of knowing what to do with it may not be as good as  
it seems.Whichever route you take, expect a struggle. Finding work you love  
is very difficult. Most people fail. Even if you succeed, it's  
rare to be free to work on what you want till your thirties or  
forties. But if you have the destination in sight you'll be more  
likely to arrive at it. If you know you can love work, you're in  
the home stretch, and if you know what work you love, you're  
practically there.Notes[1]  
Currently we do the opposite: when we make kids do boring work,  
like arithmetic drills, instead of admitting frankly that it's  
boring, we try to disguise it with superficial decorations.[2]  
One father told me about a related phenomenon: he found himself  
concealing from his family how much he liked his work. When he  
wanted to go to work on a saturday, he found it easier to say that  
it was because he "had to" for some reason, rather than admitting  
he preferred to work than stay home with them.[3]  
Something similar happens with suburbs. Parents move to suburbs  
to raise their kids in a safe environment, but suburbs are so dull  
and artificial that by the time they're fifteen the kids are convinced  
the whole world is boring.[4]  
I'm not saying friends should be the only audience for your  
work. The more people you can help, the better. But friends should  
be your compass.[5]  
Donald Hall said young would-be poets were mistaken to be so  
obsessed with being published. But you can imagine what it would  
do for a 24 year old to get a poem published in The New Yorker.  
Now to people he meets at parties he's a real poet. Actually he's  
no better or worse than he was before, but to a clueless audience  
like that, the approval of an official authority makes all the  
difference. So it's a harder problem than Hall realizes. The  
reason the young care so much about prestige is that the people  
they want to impress are not very discerning.[6]  
This is isomorphic to the principle that you should prevent  
your beliefs about how things are from being contaminated by how  
you wish they were. Most people let them mix pretty promiscuously.  
The continuing popularity of religion is the most visible index of  
that.[7]  
A more accurate metaphor would be to say that the graph of jobs  
is not very well connected.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Dan Friedman, Sarah Harlin,  
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