

OP-ED

T. S. Eliot was a banker

This fact has stuck in my brain since I fell in love with *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in university. Yes, the man who was arguably the most important English language poet of the 20th century measured out his life “with coffee spoons” in... a bank. Lloyds Bank to be exact. Where he turned his mind to international exchange rates, sovereign bond issues and payment of war debts. Never mind that Eliot’s letters reveal that the stress of a divided life became unsupportable (he never had enough time to write!), the point here is that even Thomas Stearns Eliot had to balance his passion (poetry) with reality (a regular salary from the bank). Eliot worked at Lloyds between 1917 and 1926. Do I dare to draw a parallel to modern life?

There is a big movement in the personal development world that tells you to follow your bliss. Unhappy and unfulfilled? It’s because you aren’t doing what you love. If you don’t love what you do, you can’t take inspired action and therefore you are much like Prufrock’s patient “etherised upon a table”. Another American poet Robert Frost described it this way: his object in life was to “unite his avocation with his vocation”. The ideal of conflating passion, purpose and profession is beyond seductive to those whose lives have been routinised into numbness by the corporate machine and yearn to rage against it – and it has become a sort of siren song for the millennials, luring many away from traditional institutions in favour of social and creative enterprise: “I have heard the mermaids singing each to each”.

“The ideal of conflating passion, purpose and profession is beyond seductive to those whose lives have been routinised into numbness”



While nearly all humans desire freedom, creativity and passion, somehow the “do what you love and you will love your life *and the money will follow*” advice seems to oversimplify matters. Thus, the following points seem worth making:

1. Not everybody can pinpoint a professional passion. The hopeful romantic in me hates this truth – but it’s true. As my little sister tells me, they call it work for a reason. In *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Alain de Botton paints an even bleaker picture – he says only 1% of the population has a calling and the rest of us feel mere mild tremors of interest. The notion that everybody can fulfill a magical career destiny is, in de Botton’s view, cruel because this sentimentality sets most of us up for bitter disappointment and even worse, despair. Reality, in this sense, does in fact bite. A banking colleague I used to work with once put it this way: “Who is the jerk who invented work?”

“If you feel those minor tremors of interest at work, cultivate them, grow your expertise and think about how you can connect with others”

2. Following your heart is always the right thing to do. Perhaps you are part of the fortunate one percent and have already found your calling in your current role as a woman in business law. Or maybe you are equally fortunate to have identified your passion elsewhere. In the latter case, following your heart will always feel fulfilling but, at risk of stating the obvious, it won't necessarily lead to financial success. For another reality check, one only needs to turn to *The Art of Thinking Clearly*, where Rolf Dobelli describes the survivorship bias – whereby people systematically overestimate their chances of success because in daily life, “triumph is made more visible than failure”. In light of how miniscule the probability of success really is, it is best to balance heart with head and first gauge your own risk appetite and then manage that risk accordingly. For some, this may mean that passions remain hobbies – which themselves can serve as wellsprings of joy. For others, it may mean to pursue the dream with full force while continuing to work in a law firm, a bank

or another similar institution. Today this dual-pronged approach is sometimes referred to as a portfolio career. If it worked for T.S. Eliot...

3. Beyond hobbies and portfolio careers, there is even more hope. And that hope doesn't reside in creating a successful smoothie business, becoming a rock star or even changing the world – not that there is anything wrong with any of those endeavours. The hope lives in something more democratic – something accessible to us all. Cal Newport, professor and thought leader who coined the term “deep work”, explains:

“The traits that lead people to love their work are general and have little to do with a job's specifics. These traits include a sense of autonomy and the feeling that you're good at what you do and are having an impact on the world... Passion is not something you follow. It's something that will follow you as you put in the hard work to become valuable to the world.”

Cal reminds us of the intrinsic value of work

and, in a sense, of the power of embracing the present moment. Rather than dreaming of a dream job out there that may not exist or a calling that you might just miss, start by accepting where you are and shifting your mindset to your daily tasks. If you really don't like what you do, of course make a change – but if you feel those minor tremors of interest at work, cultivate them, grow your expertise and think about how you can connect with others to make work life better for both yourself and those around you. When I feel uninspired by the prospect of unravelling the meaning of a credit default swap, I try to remind myself that the true meaning lies not in the financial instrument itself but in the act of unravelling its meaning. If only T.S. Eliot knew how lucky he was to have predated financial weapons of mass destruction.

So does all of this mean that the professional dream is dead? Not at all. In fact, it means the opposite: no matter whether you have found your passion or not, the dream is already and always alive inside of you.

*“You are the music
While the music lasts” -Four Quartets*



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