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GOOD
THEY CAN'T
IGNORE
YOU

Why **Skills** Trump Passion
in the Quest for **Work** You Love

CAL NEWPORT

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in the Quest for Work You Love*

CAL NEWPORT



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To Julie

Introduction

The Passion of the Monk

“ ‘Follow your passion’ is dangerous advice.”

Thomas had this realization in one of the last places you might expect. He was walking a trail through the oak forest that outlines the southern bowl of Tremper Mountain. The trail was one of many that cross through the 230-acre property of the Zen Mountain Monastery, which has called this corner of the Catskill Mountains its home since the early 1980s. Thomas was halfway through a two-year stay at the monastery, where he was a practicing lay monk. His arrival, one year earlier, had been the fulfillment of a dream-job fantasy that he had nurtured for years. He had followed his passion for all things Zen into this secluded Catskills retreat and had expected happiness in return. As he stood in the oak forest that afternoon, however, he began to cry, his fantasy crumbling around him.

“I was always asking, ‘What’s the meaning of life?’ ” Thomas told me when I first met him, at a coffee shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By then, several years had passed since Thomas’s realization in the Catskills, but the path that led him to that point remained clear and he was eager to talk about it, as if the recounting would help exorcise the demons of his complicated past.

After earning a pair of bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and theology, then a master’s degree in comparative religion, Thomas decided that Zen Buddhist practice was the key to a meaningful life. “There was such a big crossover between the philosophy I was studying and Buddhism that I thought, ‘Let me just go practice Buddhism directly to answer these big questions,’ ” he told me.

After graduation, however, Thomas needed money, so he took on a variety of jobs. He spent a year, for example, teaching English in Gumi, an industrial town in central South Korea. To many, life in East Asia might sound romantic, but this exoticism soon wore off for Thomas. “Every Friday night, after work, the men would gather at these street carts, which had tents extending out from them,” Thomas told me. “They gathered to drink soju [a distilled rice liquor] late into the night. During winter there would be steam coming from these tents,

from all the men drinking. What I remember most, however, is that the next morning the streets would be covered in dry vomit.”

Thomas’s search also inspired him to travel across China and into Tibet, and to spend time in South Africa, among other journeys, before ending up in London working a rather dull job in data entry. Throughout this period, Thomas nurtured his conviction that Buddhism held the key to his happiness. Over time, this daydream evolved into the idea of him living as a monk. “I had built up such an incredible fantasy about Zen practice and living in a Zen monastery,” he explained to me. “It came to represent my dream come true.” All other work paled in comparison to this fantasy. He was dedicated to following his passion.

It was while in London that Thomas first learned about the Zen Mountain Monastery, and he was immediately attracted to its seriousness. “These people were practicing really intense and sincere Zen,” he recalls. His passion insisted that the Zen Mountain Monastery was where he belonged.

It took nine months for Thomas to complete the application process. When he finally arrived at Kennedy airport, having been approved to come live and practice at the monastery, he boarded a bus to take him into the Catskill countryside. The ride took three hours. After leaving the city sprawl, the bus proceeded through a series of quaint towns, with the scenery getting “progressively more beautiful.” In a scene of almost contrived symbolism, the bus eventually reached the foot of Tremper Mountain, where it stopped and let Thomas out at a crossroads. He walked from the bus stop down the road leading to the monastery entrance, which was guarded by a pair of wrought-iron gates, left open for new arrivals.

Once on the grounds, Thomas approached the main building, a four-story converted church constructed from local bluestone and timbered with local oak. “It is as if the mountain offered itself as a dwelling place for spiritual practice” is how the monks of the monastery describe it in their official literature. Pushing past the oaken double doors, Thomas was greeted by a monk who had been tasked with welcoming newcomers. Struggling to describe the emotions of this experience, Thomas finally managed to explain it to me as follows: “It was like being really hungry, and you know that you’re going to get this amazing meal—that is what this represented for me.”

Thomas’s new life as a monk started well enough. He lived in a small cabin, set back in the woods from the main building. Early in his visit he asked a senior monk, who had been living in a similar cabin for over fifteen years, if he ever got tired of walking the trail connecting the residences to the main building. “I’m

only just starting to learn it,” the monk replied mindfully.

The days at the Zen Mountain Monastery started as early as 4:30 A.M., depending on the time of year. Remaining in silence, the monks would greet the morning with forty to eighty minutes of meditation on mats arranged with “geometric precision” in the main hall. The view outside the Gothic windows at the front of the hall was spectacular, but the mats kept the meditators too low to see out. A pair of hall monitors sat at the back of the room, occasionally pacing among the mats. Thomas explained: “If you found yourself falling asleep, you could request that they hit you with a stick they kept for this purpose.”

After breakfast, eaten in the same great hall, everyone was assigned jobs. Thomas spent time cleaning toilets and shoveling ditches as part of his housecleaning duties, but he was also assigned, somewhat anachronistically, to handle the graphic design for the monastery’s print journal. A typical day continued with more meditation, interviews with senior practitioners, and often long, inscrutable Dharma lectures. The monks were given a break each evening before dinner. Thomas often took advantage of this respite to light the woodstove in his cabin, preparing for the cold Catskill nights.

Thomas’s problems began with the koans. A koan, in the Zen tradition, is a word puzzle, often presented as a story or a question. They’re meant to defy logical answers and therefore force you to access a more intuitive understanding of reality. In explaining the concept to me, Thomas gave the following example, which he had encountered early in his practice: “Show me an immovable tree in a heavy wind.”

“I don’t even know what an answer to that would look like,” I protested.

“In an interview,” he explained, “you have to answer right away, no thinking. If you pause like that, they kick you out of the room; the interview is over.”

“Okay, I would have been kicked out.”

“Here’s the answer I gave to pass the koan,” he said. “I stood, like a tree, and waved my hands slightly as if in a wind. Right? The point was that this is a concept you really couldn’t capture in words.”

One of the first major hurdles a young practitioner faces in serious Zen practice is the Mu koan: Passing this koan is the first of the “eight gates” of Zen Buddhism. Until you reach this milestone, you’re not yet considered a serious student of the practice. Thomas seemed reluctant to explain this koan to me. I had encountered this before in my research on Zen: Because these puzzles defy rationality, any attempt to describe them to a non-practitioner can be trivializing. Because of this I didn’t press Thomas for details. Instead, I Googled it. Here’s

one translation I found:

A pilgrim of the way asked the Grand Master Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?” Zhaozhou said, “Mu.”

In Chinese, *mu* translates roughly to “no.” According to the interpretations I found, Zhaozhou is not answering the pilgrim’s question, but is instead pushing it back to the questioner. Thomas struggled to pass this koan, focusing on it intensely for months. “I worked and worked on that koan,” he told me. “I went to bed with it; I let it inhabit my whole body.”

Then he cracked it.

“One day I was walking in the forest, and a moment passed. I had been looking at these leaves, and ‘I’ had disappeared. We all experience things like this but don’t attach any importance to them. But when I had this experience, I was prepared for it, and it clicked. I realized, ‘This is the whole koan.’ ” Thomas had achieved a glimpse of the unity of nature that forms the core of the Buddhist understanding of the world. It was this unity that provided the answer to the koan. Excited, at his next interview with a senior monk Thomas made a gesture —“a simple gesture, something you might do in everyday life”—that made it clear that he had an intuitive understanding of the koan’s answer. He had made it through the first gate: He was officially a serious student of Zen.

It was not long after passing the Mu koan that Thomas had his realization about passion. He was walking in the same woods where he had cracked the koan. Armed with the insight provided by passing the Mu, he had begun to understand the once obtuse lectures given most days by the senior monks. “As I walked that trail, I realized that these lectures were all talking about the same thing as the Mu koan,” said Thomas. In other words, *this was it. This was what life as a Zen monk offered*: increasingly sophisticated musings on this one, core insight.

He had reached the zenith of his passion—he could now properly call himself a Zen practitioner—and yet, he was not experiencing the undiluted peace and happiness that had populated his daydreams.

“The reality was, nothing had changed. I was exactly the same person, with the same worries and anxieties. It was late on a Sunday afternoon when I came to this realization, and I just started crying.”

Thomas had followed his passion to the Zen Mountain Monastery, believing, as many do, that the key to happiness is identifying your true calling and then

chasing after it with all the courage you can muster. But as Thomas experienced that late Sunday afternoon in the oak forest, this belief is frighteningly naïve. Fulfilling his dream to become a full-time Zen practitioner did *not* magically make his life wonderful.

As Thomas discovered, the path to happiness—at least as it concerns what you do for a living—is more complicated than simply answering the classic question “*What should I do with my life?*”

A Quest Begins

By the summer of 2010, I had become obsessed with answering a simple question: *Why do some people end up loving what they do, while so many others fail at this goal?* It was this obsession that led me to people like Thomas, whose stories helped cement an insight I had long suspected to be true: When it comes to creating work you love, following your passion is not particularly useful advice.

The explanation for what started me down this path goes something like this: During the summer of 2010, when this preoccupation first picked up steam, I was a postdoctoral associate at MIT, where I had earned my PhD in computer science the year before. I was on track to become a professor, which, at a graduate program like MIT's, is considered to be the only respectable path. If done right, a professorship is a job for life. In other words, in 2010 I was planning what might well be my first and last job hunt. If there was ever a time to figure out what generates a passion for one's livelihood, this was it.

Tugging more insistently at my attention during this period was the very real possibility that I wouldn't end up with a professorship at all. Not long after meeting Thomas, I had set up a meeting with my advisor to discuss my academic job search. "How bad of a school are you willing to go to?" was his opening question. The academic job market is always brutal, but in 2010, with an economy still in recession, it was especially tough.

To complicate matters, my research specialty hadn't proven to be all that popular in recent years. The last two students to graduate from the group where I wrote my dissertation both ended up with professorships in Asia, while the last two postdocs to pass through the group ended up in Lugano, Switzerland, and Winnipeg, Canada, respectively. "I have to say, I found the whole process to be pretty hard, stressful, and depressing," one of these former students told me. Given that my wife and I wanted to stay in the United States, and preferably on the East Coast, a choice that drastically narrowed our options, I had to face the very real possibility that my academic job search would be a bust, forcing me to essentially start from scratch in figuring out what to do with my life.

This was the backdrop against which I launched what I eventually began to refer to as "my quest." My question was clear: *How do people end up loving what they do?* And I needed an answer.

This book documents what I discovered in my search.

Here's what you can expect in the pages ahead:

As mentioned, I didn't get far in my quest before I realized, as Thomas did before me, that the conventional wisdom on career success—*follow your passion*—is seriously flawed. It not only fails to describe how most people actually end up with compelling careers, but for many people it can actually make things worse: leading to chronic job shifting and unrelenting angst when, as it did for Thomas, one's reality inevitably falls short of the dream.

With this as a starting point, I begin with [Rule #1](#), in which I tear down the supremacy of this *passion hypothesis*. But I don't stop there. My quest pushed me beyond identifying what doesn't work, insisting that I also answer the following: **If “follow your passion” is bad advice, what should I do instead?** My search for this answer, described in [Rules #2–4](#), brought me to unexpected places. To better understand the importance of autonomy, for example, I ended up spending a day at an organic farm owned by a young Ivy League graduate. To better nuance my understanding of skill, I spent time with professional musicians—examples of a dying craftsman culture that I thought had something important to say about how we approach work. I also dived into the world of venture capitalists, screenwriters, rock-star computer programmers, and of course, hotshot professors, to name just a few more examples among many—all in an effort to pick apart what matters and what doesn't when building a compelling career. I was surprised by how many sources of insight became visible once I burned off the obscuring fog generated by a mono-focused insistence on following your passion.

The narratives in this book are bound by a common thread: *the importance of ability*. The things that make a great job great, I discovered, are rare and valuable. If you want them in your working life, you need something rare and valuable to offer in return. In other words, you need to be good at something before you can expect a good job.

Of course, mastery by itself is not enough to guarantee happiness: The many examples of well-respected but miserable workaholics support this claim. Accordingly, this main thread of my argument moves beyond the mere acquisition of useful skills and into the subtle art of investing the *career capital* this generates into the right types of traits in your working life.

This argument flips conventional wisdom. It relegates passion to the sidelines, claiming that this feeling is an epiphenomenon of a working life well lived. Don't follow your passion; rather, let it follow *you* in your quest to

become, in the words of my favorite Steve Martin quote, “so good that they can’t ignore you.”

To many, this concept is a radical shift, and as with any disruptive idea, it needs to make a splashy entrance. This is why I wrote this book in a manifesto style. I divided the content into four “rules,” each given a deliberately provocative title. I also tried to make the book short and punchy: I want to introduce a new way of looking at the world, but I don’t want to belabor the insights with excessive examples and discussions. This book *does* offer concrete advice, but you won’t find ten-step systems or self-assessment quizzes in these pages. This topic is too subtle to be reduced to the formulaic.

By the end of this book, you’ll have learned how my own story ends up and the specific ways I’m applying the insights in my own working life. We’ll also return to Thomas, who after his dispiriting realization at the monastery was able to return to his first principles, move his focus away from finding the *right work* and toward *working right*, and eventually build, for the first time in his life, a love for what he does. This is the happiness that you, too, should demand.

It’s my hope that the insights that follow will free you from simplistic catchphrases like “follow your passion” and “do what you love”—the type of catchphrases that have helped spawn the career confusion that afflicts so many today—and instead, provide you with a *realistic* path toward a meaningful and engaging working life.

RULE #1

Don't Follow Your Passion

Chapter One

The “Passion” of Steve Jobs

In which I question the validity of the passion hypothesis, which says that the key to occupational happiness is to match your job to a pre-existing passion.

The Passion Hypothesis

In June 2005, Steve Jobs took the podium at Stanford Stadium to give the commencement speech to Stanford's graduating class. Wearing jeans and sandals under his formal robe, Jobs addressed a crowd of 23,000 with a short speech that drew lessons from his life. About a third of the way into the address, Jobs offered the following advice:

You've got to find what you love.... [T]he only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking, and don't settle.

When he finished, he received a standing ovation.

Though Jobs's address contained several different lessons, his emphasis on doing what you love was the clear standout. In the official press release describing the event, for example, Stanford's news service reported that Jobs "urged graduates to pursue their dreams."

Soon after, an unofficial video of the address was posted on YouTube, where it went viral, gathering over 3.5 million views. When Stanford posted an official video, it gathered an additional 3 million views. The comments on these clips homed in on the importance of loving your work, with viewers summarizing their reactions in similar ways:

"The most valuable lesson is to find your purpose, follow your passions.... Life is too short to be doing what you think you have to do."

"Follow your passions—life is for the living."

"Passion is the engine to living your life."

"[It's] passion for your work that counts."

" 'Don't Settle.' Amen."

In other words, many of the millions of people who viewed this speech were excited to see Steve Jobs—a guru of iconoclastic thinking—put his stamp of approval on an immensely appealing piece of popular career advice, which I call the passion hypothesis:

The Passion Hypothesis

The key to occupational happiness is to first figure out what you're passionate about and then find a job that matches this passion.

This hypothesis is one of modern American society's most well-worn themes. Those of us lucky enough to have some choice in what we do with our lives are bombarded with this message, starting at an early age. We are told to lionize those with the courage to follow their passion, and pity the conformist drones who cling to the safe path.

If you doubt the ubiquity of this message, spend a few minutes browsing the career-advice shelf the next time you visit a bookstore. Once you look past the technical manuals on résumé writing and job-interview etiquette, it's hard to find a book that doesn't promote the passion hypothesis. These books have titles like *Career Match: Connecting Who You Are with What You'll Love to Do*, and *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type*, and they promise that you're just a few personality tests away from finding your dream job. Recently, a new, more aggressive strain of the passion hypothesis has been spreading—a strain that despairs that traditional “cubicle jobs,” by their very nature, are bad, and that passion requires that you strike out on your own. This is where you find titles like *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, which, as one review described it, “teaches the tricks behind finding what makes you purr.”

These books, as well as the thousands of full-time bloggers, professional counselors, and self-proclaimed gurus who orbit these same core issues of workplace happiness, all peddle the same lesson: *to be happy, you must follow your passion*. As one prominent career counselor told me, “do what you love, and the money will follow” has become the de facto motto of the career-advice field.

There is, however, a problem lurking here: When you look past the feel-good slogans and go deeper into the details of how passionate people like Steve Jobs really got started, or ask scientists about what actually predicts workplace happiness, the issue becomes much more complicated. You begin to find threads of nuance that, once pulled, unravel the tight certainty of the passion hypothesis, eventually leading to an unsettling recognition: **“Follow your passion” might just be terrible advice.**

It was around the time I was transitioning from graduate school that I started to pull on these threads, eventually leading to my complete rejection of the passion hypothesis and kicking off my quest to find out what really matters for creating work you love. [Rule #1](#) is dedicated to laying out my argument against passion, as this insight—that “follow your passion” is bad advice—provides the foundation for everything that follows. Perhaps the best place to start is where

we began, with the real story of Steve Jobs and the founding of Apple Computer.

Do What Steve Jobs Did, Not What He Said

If you had met a young Steve Jobs in the years leading up to his founding of Apple Computer, you wouldn't have pegged him as someone who was passionate about starting a technology company. Jobs had attended Reed College, a prestigious liberal arts enclave in Oregon, where he grew his hair long and took to walking barefoot. Unlike other technology visionaries of his era, Jobs wasn't particularly interested in either business or electronics as a student. He instead studied Western history and dance, and dabbled in Eastern mysticism.

Jobs dropped out of college after his first year, but remained on campus for a while, sleeping on floors and scrounging free meals at the local Hare Krishna temple. His non-conformity made him a campus celebrity—a “freak” in the terminology of the times. As Jeffrey S. Young notes in his exhaustively researched 1988 biography, *Steve Jobs: The Journey Is the Reward*, Jobs eventually grew tired of being a pauper and, during the early 1970s, returned home to California, where he moved back in with his parents and talked himself into a night-shift job at Atari. (The company had caught his attention with an ad in the *San Jose Mercury News* that read, “Have fun and make money.”) During this period, Jobs split his time between Atari and the All-One Farm, a country commune located north of San Francisco. At one point, he left his job at Atari for several months to make a mendicants' spiritual journey through India, and on returning home he began to train seriously at the nearby Los Altos Zen Center.

In 1974, after Jobs's return from India, a local engineer and entrepreneur named Alex Kamradt started a computer time-sharing company dubbed Call-in Computer. Kamradt approached Steve Wozniak to design a terminal device he could sell to clients to use for accessing his central computer. Unlike Jobs, Wozniak was a true electronics whiz who was obsessed with technology and had studied it formally at college. On the flip side, however, Wozniak couldn't stomach business, so he allowed Jobs, a longtime friend, to handle the details of the arrangement. All was going well until the fall of 1975, when Jobs left for the season to spend time at the All-One commune. Unfortunately, he failed to tell Kamradt he was leaving. When he returned, he had been replaced.

I tell this story because these are hardly the actions of someone passionate about technology and entrepreneurship, yet this was less than a year before Jobs started Apple Computer. In other words, in the months leading up to the start of

his visionary company, Steve Jobs was something of a conflicted young man, seeking spiritual enlightenment and dabbling in electronics only when it promised to earn him quick cash.

It was with this mindset that later that same year, Jobs stumbled into his big break. He noticed that the local “wireheads” were excited by the introduction of model-kit computers that enthusiasts could assemble at home. (He wasn’t alone in noticing the potential of this excitement. When an ambitious young Harvard student saw the first kit computer grace the cover of *Popular Electronics* magazine, he formed a company to develop a version of the BASIC programming language for the new machine, eventually dropping out of school to grow the business. He called the new firm Microsoft.)

Jobs pitched Wozniak the idea of designing one of these kit computer circuit boards so they could sell them to local hobbyists. The initial plan was to make the boards for \$25 apiece and sell them for \$50. Jobs wanted to sell one hundred, total, which, after removing the costs of printing the boards, and a \$1,500 fee for the initial board design, would leave them with a nice \$1,000 profit. Neither Wozniak nor Jobs left their regular jobs: This was strictly a low-risk venture meant for their free time.

From this point, however, the story quickly veers into legend. Steve arrived barefoot at the Byte Shop, Paul Terrell’s pioneering Mountain View computer store, and offered Terrell the circuit boards for sale. Terrell didn’t want to sell plain boards, but said he would buy fully assembled computers. He would pay \$500 for each, and wanted fifty as soon as they could be delivered. Jobs jumped at the opportunity to make an even larger amount of money and began scrounging together start-up capital. It was in this unexpected windfall that Apple Computer was born. As Young emphasizes, “Their plans were circumspect and small-time. They weren’t dreaming of taking over the world.”

The Messy Lessons of Jobs

I shared the details of Steve Jobs’s story, because when it comes to finding fulfilling work, the details matter. If a young Steve Jobs had taken his own advice and decided to only pursue work he loved, we would probably find him today as one of the Los Altos Zen Center’s most popular teachers. But he didn’t follow this simple advice. Apple Computer was decidedly not born out of passion, but instead was the result of a lucky break—a “small-time” scheme that unexpectedly took off.

I don’t doubt that Jobs eventually grew passionate about his work: If you’ve watched one of his famous keynote addresses, you’ve seen a man who obviously loved what he did. *But so what?* All that tells us is that *it’s good to enjoy what you do*. This advice, though true, borders on the tautological and doesn’t help us with the pressing question that we actually care about: *How do we find work that we’ll eventually love?* Like Jobs, should we resist settling into one rigid career and instead try lots of small schemes, waiting for one to take off? Does it matter what general field we explore? How do we know when to stick with a project or when to move on? In other words, Jobs’s story generates more questions than it answers. Perhaps the only thing it does make clear is that, at least for Jobs, “follow your passion” was not particularly useful advice.

Chapter Two

Passion Is Rare

In which I argue that the more you seek examples of the passion hypothesis, the more you recognize its rarity.

The *Roadtrip Nation* Revelation

It turns out that Jobs's complicated path to fulfilling work is common among interesting people with interesting careers. In 2001, a group of four friends, all recently graduated from college, set out on a cross-country road trip to interview people who "[lived] lives centered around what was meaningful to them." The friends sought advice for shaping their own careers into something fulfilling. They filmed a documentary about their trip, which was then expanded into a series on PBS. They eventually launched a nonprofit called Roadtrip Nation, with the goal of helping other young people replicate their journey. What makes Roadtrip Nation relevant is that it maintains an extensive video library of the interviews conducted for the project¹. There's perhaps no better single resource for diving into the reality of how people end up with compelling careers.

When you spend time with this archive, which is available for free online, you soon notice that the messy nature of Steve Jobs's path is more the rule than the exception. In an interview with the public radio host Ira Glass, for example, a group of three undergraduates press him for wisdom on how to "figure out what you want" and "know what you'll be good at."

"In the movies there's this idea that you should just go for your dream," Glass tells them. "But I don't believe that. Things happen in stages."

Glass emphasizes that it takes time to get good at anything, recounting the many years it took him to master radio to the point where he had interesting options. "The key thing is to force yourself through the work, force the skills to come; that's the hardest phase," he says.

Noticing the stricken faces of his interviewers, who were perhaps hoping to hear something more uplifting than *work is hard, so suck it up*, Glass continues: "I feel like your problem is that you're trying to judge all things in the abstract before you do them. That's your tragic mistake."²

Other interviews in the archive promote this same idea that it's hard to predict in advance what you'll eventually grow to love. The astrobiologist Andrew Steele, for example, exclaims, "No, I had no idea what I was going to do. I object to systems that say you should decide now what you're going to do." One of the students asks Steele if he had started his PhD program "hoping you'd one day change the world."

"No," Steele responds, "I just wanted options."³

Al Merrick, the founder of Channel Island Surfboards, tells a similar tale of

stumbling into passion over time. “People are in a rush to start their lives, and it’s sad,” he tells his interviewers. “I didn’t go out with the idea of making a big empire,” he explains. “I set goals for myself at being the best I could be at what[ever] I did.”⁴

In another clip, William Morris, a renowned glass blower based in Stanwood, Washington, brings a group of students to his workshop set in a converted barn surrounded by lush, Pacific Northwest forest. “I have a ton of different interests, and I don’t have focus,” one of the students complains. Morris looks at her: “You’ll never be sure. You don’t want to be sure.”⁵

These interviews emphasize an important point: **Compelling careers often have complex origins that reject the simple idea that all you have to do is follow your passion.**

This observation may come as a surprise for those of us who have long basked in the glow of the passion hypothesis. It wouldn’t, however, surprise the many scientists who have studied questions of workplace satisfaction using rigorous peer-reviewed research. They’ve been discovering similar conclusions for decades, but to date, not many people in the career-advice field have paid them serious attention. It’s to these overlooked research efforts that I turn your attention next.

The Science of Passion

Why do some people enjoy their work while so many other people don't? Here's the CliffsNotes summary of the social science research in this area: There are many complex reasons for workplace satisfaction, but the reductive notion of matching your job to a pre-existing passion is not among them.

To give you a better sense of the realities uncovered by this research, here are three of the more interesting conclusions I've encountered:

Conclusion #1: Career Passions Are Rare

In 2002, a research team led by the Canadian psychologist Robert J. Vallerand administered an extensive questionnaire to a group of 539 Canadian university students⁶. The questionnaire's prompts were designed to answer two important questions: *Do these students have passions? And if so, what are they?*

At the core of the passion hypothesis is the assumption that we all have pre-existing passions waiting to be discovered. This experiment puts that assumption to the test. Here's what it found: 84 percent of the students surveyed were identified as having a passion. This sounds like good news for supporters of the passion hypothesis—that is, until you dive deeper into the details of these pursuits. Here are the top five identified passions: dance, hockey (these were Canadian students, mind you), skiing, reading, and swimming. Though dear to the hearts of the students, these passions don't have much to offer when it comes to choosing a job. In fact, less than 4 percent of the total identified passions had *any* relation to work or education, with the remaining 96 percent describing hobby-style interests such as sports and art.

Take a moment to absorb this result, as it deals a strong blow to the passion hypothesis. How can we follow our passions if we don't have any relevant passions to follow? At least for these Canadian college students, the vast majority will need a different strategy for choosing their career.

Conclusion #2: Passion Takes Time

Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor of organizational behavior at Yale University, has made a career studying how people think about their work. Her breakthrough paper, published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* while she was still a graduate student, explores the distinction between a job, a career, and a calling⁷. A *job*, in Wrzesniewski's formulation, is a way to pay the bills, a *career* is a path toward increasingly better work, and a *calling* is work that's an important part of your life and a vital part of your identity.

Wrzesniewski surveyed employees from a variety of occupations, from doctors to computer programmers to clerical workers, and found that most people strongly identify their work with one of these three categories. A possible explanation for these different classifications is that some occupations are better than others. The passion hypothesis, for example, predicts that occupations that match common passions, such as being a doctor or a teacher, should have a high proportion of people who experience the work as a true calling, while less flashy occupations—the type that no one daydreams about—should have almost no one experiencing the work as a calling. To test this explanation, Wrzesniewski looked at a group of employees who all had the *same* position and nearly identical work responsibilities: college administrative assistants. She found, to her admitted surprise, that these employees were roughly evenly split between seeing their position as a job, a career, or a calling. In other words, it seems that the type of work alone does not necessarily predict how much people enjoy it.

Supporters of the passion hypothesis, however, might reply that a position like a college administrative assistant will attract a wide variety of employees. Some might arrive at the position because they have a passion for higher education and will therefore love the work, while others might stumble into the job for other reasons, perhaps because it's stable and has good benefits, and therefore will have a less exalted experience.

But Wrzesniewski wasn't done. She surveyed the assistants to figure out *why* they saw their work so differently, and discovered that the strongest predictor of an assistant seeing her work as a calling was the number of years spent on the job. In other words, the more experience an assistant had, the more likely she was to love her work.

This result deals another blow to the passion hypothesis. In Wrzesniewski's research, the happiest, most passionate employees are not those who followed their passion into a position, but instead those who have been around long

enough to become good at what they do. On reflection, this makes sense. If you have many years' experience, then you've had time to get better at what you do and develop a feeling of efficacy. It also gives you time to develop strong relationships with your coworkers and to see many examples of your work benefiting others. What's important here, however, is that this explanation, though reasonable, contradicts the passion hypothesis, which instead emphasizes the immediate happiness that comes from matching your job to a true passion.

Conclusion #3: Passion Is a Side Effect of Mastery

Not long into his popular TED talk, titled “On the Surprising Science of Motivation,” author Daniel Pink, discussing his book *Drive*, tells the audience that he spent the last couple of years studying the science of human motivation. “I’m telling you, it’s not even close,” he says. “If you look at the science, there is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does.” When Pink talks about “what science knows,” he’s referring, for the most part, to a forty-year-old theoretical framework known as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which is arguably the best understanding science currently has for why some pursuits get our engines running while others leave us cold.⁸

SDT tells us that motivation, in the workplace or elsewhere, requires that you fulfill three basic psychological needs—factors described as the “nutriments” required to feel intrinsically motivated for your work:

- **Autonomy:** the feeling that you have control over your day, and that your actions are important
- **Competence:** the feeling that you are good at what you do
- **Relatedness:** the feeling of connection to other people

The last need is the least surprising: If you feel close to people at work, you’re going to enjoy work more. It’s the first two needs that prove more interesting. It’s clear, for example, that autonomy and competence are related. In most jobs, as you become better at what you do, not only do you get the sense of accomplishment that comes from being good, but you’re typically also rewarded with more control over your responsibilities. These results help explain Amy Wrzesniewski’s findings: Perhaps one reason that more experienced assistants enjoyed their work was because it takes time to build the competence and autonomy that generates this enjoyment.

Of equal interest is what this list of basic psychological needs does *not* include. Notice, scientists did not find “matching work to pre-existing passions” as being important for motivation. The traits they *did* find, by contrast, are more general and are agnostic to the specific type of work in question. Competence and autonomy, for example, are achievable by most people in a wide variety of jobs—assuming they’re willing to put in the hard work required for mastery. This message is not as inspiring as “follow your passion and you’ll immediately

be happy,” but it certainly has a ring of truth. In other words, working right trumps finding the right work.

Chapter Three

Passion Is Dangerous

In which I argue that subscribing to the passion hypothesis can make you less happy.

The Birth of the Passion Hypothesis

It's difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when our society began emphasizing the importance of following your passion, but a good approximation is the 1970 publication of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* The author, Richard Bolles, was working at the time for the Episcopal Church advising campus ministers, many of whom were in danger of losing their jobs. He published the first edition of *Parachute* as a straightforward collection of tips for those facing career change. The original print run was one hundred copies.

The premise of Bolles's guide sounds self-evident to the modern ear: "[Figure] out what you like to do... and then find a place that needs people like you." But in 1970, this was a radical notion. "[At the time,] the idea of doing a lot of pen-and-paper exercises in order to take control of your own career was regarded as a dilettante's exercise," Bolles recalls¹. The optimism of this message, however, caught on: *You* can control what you do with your life, so why not pursue what you love? There are now more than six million copies of Bolles's book in print.

The decades since the publication of Bolles's book can be understood as a period of increasing dedication to the passion hypothesis. You can visualize this shift by using Google's Ngram Viewer². This tool allows you to search Google's vast corpus of digitized books to see how often selected phrases turn up in published writing over time. If you enter "follow your passion," you see a spike in usage right at 1970 (the year when Bolles's book was published), followed by a relatively steady high usage until 1990, at which point the graph curve swings upward. By 2000, the phrase "follow your passion" was showing up in print three times more often than in the seventies and eighties.

Parachute, in other words, helped introduce the baby boom generation to this passion-centric take on career, a lesson they have now passed down to their children, the echo boom generation, which has since raised the bar on passion obsession. This young generation has "high expectations for work," explains psychologist Jeffrey Arnett, an expert on the mindset of the modern postgrad. "They expect work to be not just a job but an adventure[,].... a venue for self-development and self-expression[,].... and something that provides a satisfying fit with their assessment of their talents."³

Even if you accept my argument that the passion hypothesis is flawed, it's at this point that you might respond, "Who cares!" If the passion hypothesis can

encourage even a small number of people to leave a bad job or to experiment with their career, you might argue, then it has provided a service. The fact that this occupational fairy tale has spread so far should not cause concern.

I disagree. The more I studied the issue, the more I noticed that the passion hypothesis convinces people that somewhere there's a magic "right" job waiting for them, and that if they find it, they'll immediately recognize that this is the work *they were meant to do*. The problem, of course, is when they fail to find this certainty, bad things follow, such as chronic job-hopping and crippling self-doubt.

We can see this effect in the statistics. As I just established, the last several decades are marked by an increasing commitment to Bolles's contagious idea. And yet, for all of this increased focus on following our passion and holding out for work we love, *we aren't getting any happier*. The 2010 Conference Board survey of U.S. job satisfaction found that only 45 percent of Americans describe themselves as satisfied with their jobs. This number has been steadily decreasing from the mark of 61 percent recorded in 1987, the first year of the survey. As Lynn Franco, the director of the Board's Consumer Research Center notes, this is not just about a bad business cycle: "Through both economic boom and bust during the past two decades, our job satisfaction numbers have shown a consistent downward trend." Among young people, the group perhaps most concerned with the role of work in their lives, 64 percent now say that they're actively unhappy in their jobs. This is the highest level of dissatisfaction ever measured for any age group over the full two-decade history of the survey⁴. In other words, our generation-spanning experiment with passion-centric career planning can be deemed a failure: The more we focused on loving what we do, the less we ended up loving it.

These statistics, of course, are not clear-cut, as other factors play a role in declining workplace happiness. To develop a more visceral understanding of this unease, we can turn to anecdotal sources. Consider Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner's 2001 ode to youth disaffection, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*. This book chronicles the personal testimony of dozens of unhappy twentysomethings who feel adrift in the world of work. Take, for example, the tale of Scott, a twenty-seven-year-old from Washington, D.C.

"My professional situation now couldn't be more perfect," Scott reports. "I chose to pursue the career I knew in my heart I was passionate about: politics.... I love my office, my friends... even my boss." The glamorous promises of the

passion hypothesis, however, led Scott to question whether his perfect job was perfect enough. “It’s not fulfilling,” he worries when reflecting on the fact that his job, like all jobs, includes difficult responsibilities. He has since restarted his search for his life’s work. “I’ve committed myself to exploring other options that interest me,” Scott says. “But I’m having a hard time actually thinking of a career that sounds appealing.”

“I graduated college wanting nothing more than the ultimate job for me,” says Jill, another young person profiled in *Quarterlife Crisis*. Not surprisingly, everything Jill tried failed to meet this high mark.

“I’m so lost about what I want to do,” despairs twenty-five-year-old Elaine, “that I don’t even realize what I’m sacrificing.”⁵

And so on. These stories, which are increasingly common at all ages, from college students to the middle-aged, all point toward the same conclusion: **The passion hypothesis is not just wrong, it’s also dangerous.** Telling someone to “follow their passion” is not just an act of innocent optimism, but potentially the foundation for a career riddled with confusion and angst.

Beyond Passion

Before continuing, I should emphasize an obvious point: For some people, following their passion works. The Roadtrip Nation archives, for example, include an interview with *Rolling Stone* film critic Peter Travers, who claims that even as a child he used to bring notebooks into movie theaters to record his thoughts⁶. The power of passion is even more common when you look to the careers of gifted individuals, such as professional athletes. You'd be hard-pressed, for example, to find a professional baseball player who doesn't claim that he has been passionate about the sport as far back as he can remember.

Some people I've talked to about my ideas have used examples of this type to dismiss my conclusions about passion. "Here's a case where someone successfully followed their passion," they say, "therefore 'follow your passion' must be good advice." This is faulty logic. Observing a few instances of a strategy working does not make it universally effective. It is necessary instead to study a large number of examples and ask what worked in the vast majority of the cases. And when you study a large group of people who are passionate about what they do, as I did in researching this book, you find that most—*not all*—will tell a story more complex than simply identifying a pre-existing passion and then pursuing it. Examples such as Peter Travers and professional athletes, therefore, are exceptions. If anything, their rareness underscores my claim that for *most people*, "follow your passion" is bad advice.

This conclusion inspires an important follow-up question: Without the passion hypothesis to guide us, what should we do instead? This is the question I take up in the three rules that follow. These rules chronicle my quest to figure out how people *really* end up loving what they do. They represent a shift away from the tone of lawyerly argument used here and into something more personal: evidence of my attempts to capture the complexity and ambiguity of my encounters with the reality of workplace happiness. With the thorny underbrush of the passion hypothesis cleared, we can only now bring light to a more realistic strain of career advice that has so long been strangled in the shadows. This is a process that begins in the next rule with my arrival at an unlikely source of insight: a group of bluegrass musicians practicing their craft in the suburbs of Boston.

RULE #2

Be So Good They Can't Ignore You

(Or, the Importance of Skill)

Chapter Four

The Clarity of the Craftsman

In which I introduce two different approaches to thinking about work: the craftsman mindset, a focus on what value you're producing in your job, and the passion mindset, a focus on what value your job offers you. Most people adopt the passion mindset, but in this chapter I argue that the craftsman mindset is the foundation for creating work you love.

Upstairs at the Bluegrass Frat House

When I first rounded the corner onto Mapleton Street, the house, a careworn Victorian, blended in with its tidy suburban neighbors. It was only as I got closer that I noticed the eccentricities. The paint was peeling. There was a pair of leather recliners outside on the porch. Empty Bud Light bottles littered the ground.

Jordan Tice, a professional guitar player of the New Acoustic style, stood by the front door smoking a cigarette. He waved me over. As I followed him inside, I noticed that a small foyer set off the entry had been converted into a bedroom. “The banjo player who sleeps there has a PhD from MIT,” Jordan said. “You’d like him.”

Jordan is one of many musicians who come and go from the rental, squeezing themselves into any space that meets the technical definition of habitable. “Welcome to the bluegrass frat house,” he said, by way of explanation as we headed up to the second floor where he lives. Jordan’s room is monastic. Smaller than any dorm room I had at college, it’s just big enough for a twin bed and a simple pressboard desk. A Fender tube amp sits in one corner and a rolling luggage bag in the other. Most of his guitars, I assume, are kept downstairs in the common practice space, as I only saw one in the room, a beat-up Martin. We had to borrow a chair from another room so that we could both sit.

Jordan is twenty-four. In the world of traditional work this is young, but when you consider that he signed his first record deal while still in high school, it’s clear that in the world of acoustic music Jordan’s no rookie. He’s also painfully modest. One review of his third album, *Long Story*, began, “Music has always had its share of prodigies, from Mozart up to the current day.”¹ This is exactly the type of praise that Jordan would hate for me to write about. When I asked him why Gary Ferguson, a well-known bluegrass artist, chose Jordan at the age of sixteen to tour with him, he could only stammer, before lapsing into silence.

“It’s a big deal,” I pushed. “He chose you to be his guitar player. He had his choice of lots of guitar players, and he chose a sixteen-year-old.”

“I don’t derive any arrogance from that specific thing,” he finally answered.

Here’s what does excite Jordan: his music. When I asked him, “What are you working on today?” his eyes lit up as he grabbed an open composition book from his desk. On it were five lines of music, lightly penciled in—mainly dense runs