All WORK No PLAY

Is our culture's advice to "follow your passion" leading our careers astray?

By WING SZE TANG

PHOTOGRAPHY: OWEN BRUCE

IN ONE OF MY FIRST MAGAZINE JOBS, I arrived on day one to find a desk stacked with apparently forgotten layouts, all of which needed to be copy-edited by a near-impossible deadline. That week, I stayed well past midnight many nights, clocking major overtime—unpaid, of course—to show I had the zeal to succeed. After all, I'd grown up with "Follow your passion" as a vague but thrilling life plan and I'd been offered a key to the industry of my dreams. Long hours at entry-level pay just seemed like the price of unlocking the door.

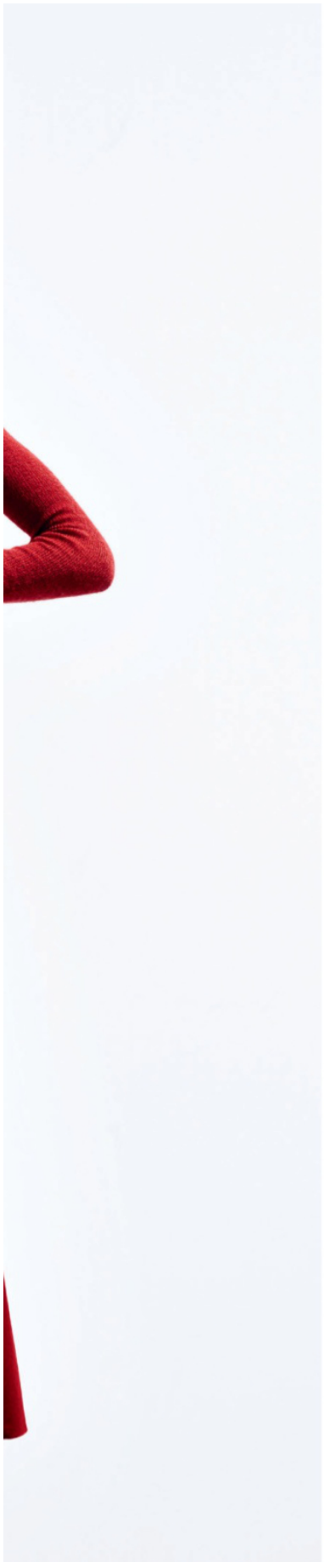
My mindset was the same as practically all of the Canadian teens surveyed in 2015 by the RBC Youth Optimism Study: 93 percent of 14- to 25-year-olds said that having a fulfilling job is important to them. (American teens surveyed by the Pew Research Center in 2018 rated it even higher, at 95 percent.) So I stayed late at the office, regularly eating dinners at my desk, and then went home to write freelance stories on the side—because who needs sleep? "Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life," preach the Insta-philosophers, but in real life, work is no vacation—even if you love it. I thought passion meant being 100 percent dedicated, 100 percent of the time, no matter how overloaded I was. Unsurprisingly, I soon burned out.

"Passion exploitation" is the term for the kind of experience I had, according to research published last year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*: The studies showed that people consider it acceptable to take advantage of those who feel passionate about their job—by, say, asking them to put in extra hours for free. Emotionally invested employees are assumed to experience work as its own reward, so if they're only getting "passion pay" (a phrase, coined in Korea, for low wages given to eager young workers), well, that's reasonable because they must also be having a ton of fun. ➤

THE PURSUIT OF *PURPOSE*

IT WASN'T ALWAYS THIS WAY: In fact, the concept of a passion-centred career is relatively modern. When assembly-line jobs began rolling out, Henry Ford told his employees that the point of work was simply work and that fun had its place—afterwards, at home. "It is high time to rid ourselves of the notion that leisure for workmen is either 'lost time' or a class privilege," the American industrialist said while instituting shorter workweeks (40 hours, down from 48) in 1926. Back then, "people understood that you didn't have to love or enjoy work," says Jae Yun Kim, Duke University Ph.D. grad and lead author of the research on passion exploitation. "But nowadays, there is a cultural pressure that prioritizes work as a place where you need to find meaning."

That messaging is served up everywhere, from inspirational movies geared toward all ages (in *Ratatouille*, a rat seeks to prove he isn't a pest by becoming a top chef) to Instagram quotes ("The only way to do great work is to love what you do." – Steve Jobs) to magazine articles lionizing entrepreneurs ("I follow my nerdy passions," Karlie Kloss declares on a *Fast Company* cover that urges the reader to "FIND YOUR PURPOSE"). Today, "So, what do you do?" is the least creative icebreaker at any given party; it assumes work is what defines us.



This conviction is specific to certain cultures, explains Paul O'Keefe, assistant professor of psychology at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, who has done research into how we develop interests. In many Asian countries, a "collectivist" attitude is common: People think of themselves as connected to others, like their family. So if Mom and Dad dream of you becoming a doctor or lawyer, that holds a lot of sway. But in the West, our mindset is "individualist" and the pressure to follow our passion fits neatly with that notion. "It celebrates this very North American or European idea: 'I am different from other people, and part of my purpose in life is to find something that fulfills me,'" says O'Keefe.

The concept narrows our view of how we can achieve happiness and can set us up for frustration (what happens if you don't know what you want to be when you grow up?), but it has become a compelling motivational mantra because we link work to self-worth. In fact, for many raised in this career-focused culture, even taking a little time off can be guilt-inducing. A 2016 survey in the U.S. found that "work martyrs"—employees who forgo vacations to show total dedication to their jobs—are overwhelmingly millennials. And not only is this generation more likely to make sacrifices for their jobs but nearly half said it's a good thing to be considered a work martyr by their managers.

CAUTION: *LEARNING* CURVE AHEAD

NORMALIZING A NON-STOP SCHEDULE isn't the only problem with the pursuit of passion. Crucially, it makes us believe the myth that answering our one true calling will be easy, just as soon as we figure out what it is. "Saying 'Find your passion' is like saying there's a treasure chest out there and you just need to find it," says O'Keefe. "And once you do—*blammo!* It's all there, 100 percent, ready to go. That's just not how interests work." Rather, your passion can be cultivated (what psychologists call "growth theory"), which seems like stating the obvious to anyone who's ever picked up a new skill, like boxing or hip-hop dancing—there's usually a steep learning curve before you love it.

But some of us buy into the idea that our core interests are like our hair colour: We're born with them. (This is known as "fixed theory.") There are a bunch of other beliefs that go hand in hand with that, suggests research led by O'Keefe and published in *Psychological Science*. For instance, you'd be less open to exploring new interests outside of what you're already into. Suppose you're a fine-arts grad who would like physics too—but you don't give the latter a chance, ignoring a possible alternative career path. Or perhaps you're what Emilie Wapnick, author of *How to Be Everything: A Guide for Those Who Still Don't Know What They Want to Be When They Grow Up*, dubs a "multipotentialite": someone with lots of diverse passions who would be creatively stifled by a narrowly focused life.

Those who think their interests are innate and locked in are also more likely to assume that doing what they love will be no sweat. "It's magical thinking: Once you find your passion, it's going to come with limitless motivation. Makes it easy, right?" says O'Keefe. So when things get hard—and they always do—these people are quicker to lose interest. After all, if it's too gruelling, maybe it wasn't their real passion after all.

That's why the well-meaning advice given by career counsellors everywhere could ultimately end in failure: "Urging people to find their passion may lead them to put all their eggs in one basket but then to drop that basket when it becomes difficult to carry," write the researchers in the *Psychological Science* paper. ➤

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PLAY THE *LONG* GAME

TO BE CLEAR, NO ONE'S arguing passion is bad. "When we think about the healthiest things that could spark motivation, what could be better than one's own deep interest?" asks O'Keefe. "That's healthier than being motivated by fear." Likewise, if doing what you love doesn't come with burnout levels of overwork, it can bring about greater well-being. Multiple studies, for example, link the pursuit of passion with lower rates of stress and depression.

But consider that a deep interest doesn't have to be your reason to rise and grind. "Psychologists have done a lot of work on what motivates people, and they discovered that the things you love to do—and would do whether or not somebody paid you—become less enjoyable when you are paid to do them," says Joanne B. Ciulla, a professor at New Jersey's Rutgers Business School and the author of *The Working Life: The Promise and Betrayal of Modern Work*. You could be an avid home cook who would hate toiling in a restaurant, for example. Her advice: "Figure out how to set up your life so you can pursue your passion, but it doesn't have to be what you get paid for."

As for my own career, I still do what I love, but I'm no longer willing to back-burner everything else that makes life fascinating and fun. So I've chosen a boss who doesn't want a work martyr: me. Now, several years into freelancing, I haven't abandoned the idea of following my passion as a life plan—I just know there are plenty of places to find it off the clock. ◆

HOW TO FIND YOUR PASSION

Feeling lost? Just listen to the pros.

STAY DISTRACTION-FREE.

Haven't been able to figure out what your passion is? Maybe that's just because you haven't given yourself the time or space to actually think about it, says Angela Duckworth, a psychologist and the author of *Grit*. True, not all of our "distractions" (kids, work deadlines) are avoidable, she admits, but evaluate the ones that are negotiable (hi, Instagram) and figure out where you can take back some of your time.

FOLLOW YOUR CURIOSITY.

We know what you're thinking: Pursuing that hobby you're vaguely curious about is not the same as finding a career you're passionate about. But when bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert was struggling to write—what she told Oprah.com is her only true passion—her follow-up to *Eat, Pray, Love*, she...couldn't. Heeding the wise words of a friend, she put writing aside and took up gardening, which kept her mind occupied. Six months of low-stakes activity later (and with a few ripe tomatoes as a bonus), Gilbert's passion returned; she has since penned four more books.

HONE YOUR SKILLS.

Don't feel bad if you're stuck working a job you're not at all passionate about. Cal Newport, a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., doesn't believe that everyone is born with a passion, which he outlines in his book *So Good They Can't Ignore You*. Instead, Newport suggests, we should all be developing our inherent skill set. The better you are at something the more valuable you become, which you can turn into something satisfying. In this case, practice does indeed make perfect. PATRICIA KAROUNOS