

Bart Chaney

The Best Job in the World

I.

My wife and I were watching reality TV, and one of the contestants remarked she had “the best job in the world.” Another contestant asked her what it was she did for a living. “Lady wrestler,” she said.

Did she really say that? Surely not. I’m not sure a woman whose occupational skill set includes grappling and flying body slams would have used this term. She may have said “female wrestler” or “woman wrestler.” Most likely, she simply said, “professional wrestler,” and I switched to the genteel modifier in my own mind, for my own reasons. That’s not the point. The point is the disappointment I felt to learn that the best job in the world was one for which I would never be qualified.

Once in a while you hear, also on television, the same comment from some young and beautiful actor or actress who has just been paid several million dollars to make a motion picture with another of his or her own star-kissed breed: “I have the best job in the world. I can’t wait to get out of bed in the morning.” It is not that I don’t believe them. But do they have to make such a boast?

Then there are the big city mayors or the governors of prominent states who can be heard using the phrase in press conferences to fend off rumors of a presidential bid. “I already *have* the best job in the world.”

All these people want is that they be taken at their word: they are very pleased with their jobs; they could not, in fact, be more pleased. Those of us to whom these comments are directed are, in turn, to react with happiness *for* them. We are to congratulate them for their good luck or for the wisdom and personal insight with which they chose their occupations. Admire me, love me, pat me on the back. Vote for me in the next election; buy my t-shirt at the concession stand on your way out of the arena.

But “best job in the world”? The phrase is inaccurate. If someone came and offered me the mayoralty of a large city (or small city), the governorship of a prominent state (or puny, no-account state) or the presidency of the United States, I would turn it down in an instant. Sure, you would get your name in the history books, people would

cheer for you and music would be played when you walked out onto the stage, but it strikes me that the presidency, for instance, is the stressful sort of job one is obliged to “take home at night.” Personally—and no doubt I’m not alone in this—I would rather wrestle ladies than be President of the United States.

Thus, we begin with two obvious statements. “The best job in the world” is a relative phrase. Your “best” may not be mine. But it is also relative to jobs, in general. The best job in the world does not necessarily have to be *good*. It merely has to be better than all others.

II.

Let’s face it: jobs are part of the curse of being human. Is that too harsh? In Eden, you did not have to earn a living. The garden—which, presumably, required no cultivation—provided your living to you. When you got hungry, you simply took a stroll, and picked the berries and fruit from the bushes and trees. All except the one tree—need we even mention it?—the one that promised to satiate not the hunger for food but the hunger to rise, to stand out and be admired, to grace a motion picture screen, to see one’s name in the history books or one’s face on a t-shirt.

Instead, we got tossed out of the garden and cursed to toil. There is no need to be so *Old Testament* about it. We might state the same thing philosophically: To toil at a job is one of the many irrevocable factors that make up the tragedy of the human equation. Or aphoristically: “There is no free lunch.” Or biologically: Nature finds its balance, however cruel. So if you are not toiling, someone else somewhere is toiling twice as hard. And if you have one of those jobs you are tempted to describe as “the best in the world,” be sure that there are vast continents of faceless drudges toiling away in double-shifts.

As a young boy, I had a series of recurring nightmares in which I was required to construct towers of stacked pennies, say, or to count every blade of grass in the lawn. I would wake in a panic, which could only be calmed by walking in tight circles, singing, “The Little White Duck,” over and over. I did not know then why I kept having these dreams, but I think I understand now. They were my first inklings of what it was to be human, the tedium involved, and the toil.

Would human beings be what they are without toil? There are

those who do not have jobs at all. Kings, queens, princes and pashas, and the feckless heirs of the super-rich. We sometimes read about them and their scandals in the tabloids. Their stories sit side by side with the story about the alien or the baby born with two heads. When one is freed from the obligation to toil, and one does not compensate for this loss by voluntarily undertaking some tedious hardship (counting blades of grass, say, or crossing the Andes by skateboard), life will exact its own compensation. When young, they may be beautiful and cocaine thin, but the tabloid aristocracy is gargoyles by thirty, faces lifted, stretched and shot up with chemicals, grotesque to the eye and ridiculous. Without work, the human being can turn monstrous.

III.

But note, in the previous paragraphs, how “job” changed to “work.” In America, we have always revered work, but not so much “having a job.” Jefferson’s small farmer worked, but he did not have a job. This is connected to the Protestant notion of a “calling”—a sort of work for which one has been created, one presumes, by God. To practice one’s calling was proof itself of a divine order, that one was among the elect. This view rejects the tragic equation mentioned above. It is the *New Testament*, rather than the *Old Testament* version, befitting a New World settled by the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*. Here, one *is* one’s work. Thus, we do not have the 6 week paid vacations they have in the Netherlands, Germany, and France.

To discover and realize one’s calling would be deeply reassuring, I would imagine. Who would not trade this condition for all the government entitlements in the world?

There is a movie from the late seventies about a recidivist criminal and convict, out yet again on parole. Right away, he touches base with his old crime buddies. The first one he visits is unemployed. This friend senses the criminal has some new caper in mind, and when he leaves, begs him, “Take me with you. I want to work.”

The second friend has a job in a warehouse office, and the criminal visits him there, tries to tempt him with the prospect of a jewelry store heist. “Just think,” he says, calling attention to the surroundings with a gesture, “next week, you won’t have to do this.”

The second friend hates the job, but he hesitates. The criminal looks him in the eye. “Face it,” he says. “You’re a thief.”

It’s your calling, he might have said.

IV.

What is the difference between work (your calling) and having a job (the inevitable human toil)? Part of it is about autonomy. One makes one’s own decisions about work. In a job, one carries out somebody else’s orders. Another part has to do with the way work can consume you. On the job, you are constantly glancing at the clock. To work is to be unaware of time. In this way, work is like play. Maybe work *is* play, which we dignify by calling “work” so as not to feel guilty about it.

I have spent untold hours, for example, playing music and calling it work, when, in truth, this may be a case of willful confusion. The language is plain. You don’t “work” music. Nobody ever asks you, “What instrument do you work?”

I was seventeen years old, sitting in a little nightclub outside the small city where I went to high school. My friend and I were waiting for the band to start. The singer was a rotund, big-throated soul-shouter who called himself “Big Twist.” His band was called “The Mellow Fellows.” I’ll never forget the way the guitarist walked into the room. Not wide-eyed and underage, afraid—like my friend and I—of being thrown out of the joint, but calm, cool, and perfectly at ease. The clothes were stylish, but did not seem to have been picked out for performance—any more than did his name, Pete Special, seem particularly chosen for the stage. Likewise, the guitar case—like a toolbox or a doctor’s bag, marking him as a man of skills—seemed no less a part of him than the hand in which he carried it. He was who he was and he knew what he was there for. He was there with his friends to play music.

It was then that it occurred to me that being a musician might be the best job in the world. In many ways, I’ve never stopped believing it.

V.

At twenty, I got my first full-time job. I operated the “camera” in an industrial print shop that specialized in “continuous forms.” What this means precisely doesn’t matter. The only

relevant detail here is that it was a job that took two days to master. Not that I wasn't happy to get it; I was new to the city and broke. But it was about that time, about two days into it, I realized how different this job would be from the hundreds of part-time, short-lived jobs I'd had as a teenager. I was going to be there eight hours a day, five days a week, and after I'd done that for a full year, they'd give me five days off. I ran these numbers through my head and the reckoning I came to made me want to walk in circles, singing "The Little White Duck," over and over.

It was good, though, come a Friday, to go somewhere for happy hour, to drink as many beers as I wanted, and be able to afford them. It was good, too, on a Saturday night, to go to a club for live music and afford the cover charge. I saw the big names on the blues and R&B circuit: Ray Charles, James Brown, John Lee Hooker, The Neville Brothers. Watching the local acts that opened for them, I could barely contain myself.

"I could do that," I kept thinking.

To save money for an instrument and amplifier, I added a second job to my day job, and then, the minute I joined a band, quit both. Now the beers on a Friday afternoon were an extravagance I could no longer afford, as was the Saturday night cover charge. But what did that matter? I was now playing in the very clubs I used to go to, and—like all the local, opening acts—getting paid in beer.

But landlords, I soon discovered, won't accept the rent in beer. Nor will grocers take music in trade. So I was back to a series of part-time jobs, to fund my work, which is to say, my play. But what *gives to*, in money, also *takes from*, in time. Thus the first occasion for a thought I've had countless times since: "Just think of all the work I could do, if only I didn't have a job."

VI.

Maybe I make too much of this, this difference between work and a job. There are those who are wholly satisfied, and even happy, with the jobs they do, and you never hear them boast about it. These are the folks who truly deserve our admiration. They have learned to accept the tragic equation, the impossibility of the human without toil. They accept this and somehow stay cheerful. If getting the jobs they have required the long accumulation of skills and experience, they were humble enough to jump through the

necessary hoops and pay the dues. These are the people commonly referred to as "grown-ups." If they seem to be few in number these days, it may only be because they do not call attention to themselves.

This is no small trick, what they do. I daresay it is a job, all in itself.

And yet our films and literature are filled with the working stiffs, the silent sufferers, the quietly desperate, the settlers-for-less, the middle-class fathers who chuck it all at forty-eight for a muscle car and an inappropriate obsession, the self-deniers, the martyrs, the sad sacks, the ticking time-bombs. It is hard to know when the compromises that we make in life mark maturity and when they are simply giving up.

Let's get down to it: Why won't they give me money for doing what I love? The question sounds so bald-faced, so embarrassing and naive. That I could even ask it must mean I never learned the lesson of my boyhood nightmares. It is proof that I never grew up. For this is a question that a child would ask, like "Why is the grass green?" or "Why do they call it 'September'?"

But why *is* the grass green? And why *do* they call it "September"? And why *don't* they— whoever "they" are—give me money for doing what I love?

Two more telling details from the movie about the criminal:

The first friend he visits has a drum kit in his garage.

The second plays blues guitar and sings.

VII.

In the late 1960s, Charles Portis wrote the "Great American Novel." I will not mention its title here for I don't want those who haven't read it to judge it by the mediocre movie of the same name. Suffice it to say that the book is set in 1874, in the Indian territory, and is full of iconic American characters. One of them, a US Marshall, sits with another of them, a fourteen year old girl, on a hillside at night, waiting for the outlaws they have been tracking to appear. To pass the time, the girl asks the man what he had done before becoming a Marshall.

"I've done everything but keep school."

"Name one other thing you've done."

He names many. He has been a buffalo hunter, a soldier, a bushwhacker, a drover, and more. He does not mention professional

wrestling, but this is just the sort of rough-and-tumble work to which he seems prone. “I like being a Marshall better than anything I’ve ever done,” he says. “Nothing’s worse than droving.” (The best job is not necessarily good.) Then he sums it all up, his entire career, with a sentence that is memorable for how true it is, how American it is, for the way it combines *Old Testament* fatalism and *New Testament* hope:

“Nothing I like to do pays well.”

Here, then, is the vital difference between working and having a job. Having a job means getting a paycheck. Work is more like crime. It does not necessarily pay.

VIII.

The reality show that my wife and I like to watch is the one where a group of random contestants are placed on an isolated beach without food, water, or shelter. They must find a way to live together, as a tribe. Meanwhile they must compete against each other for rewards of questionable value, and then gather around a fire every few days to “vote someone off the island.” Though purportedly about surviving Mother Nature, this show is rather about surviving *human* nature—the malicious jockeying, turf wars, and petty deceits of group dynamics. In short, office politics, laid bare. So often it is precisely one’s colleagues that make honest work feel like a job.

Conversely, to escape the frustrations and resentments of the job, work is a place to feel human again.

The Lady Wrestler may have been adept at propelling herself off the ropes of the ring and into the body of an opponent, but her “people skills” were sorely lacking. This is perhaps not surprising, considering her occupation. In professional wrestling, the tag team is the extent of cooperation. “Excuse me, this choke hold is getting a little tiring; would you mind very much slapping my palm and taking over?”

After she was voted out, and went up to have her torch extinguished, the Lady Wrestler threw a last glance at the tribe-mates who had just ejected her. Oh, how she longed for a moment in the ring with them! She would get very busy with them. She would really go to work.