

The Danger and Usefulness of Labels

"I want to go into business."

What do you mean by business?

"I guess I don't know."

I have a lot of conversations like that with young people. They have some ill-defined desires and fears, and they feel pressure to choose a destiny or at least provide a ready answer when someone asks, "What are you doing?" The resolution comes from a label.

Pick from a handful of standard labels deemed understandable and acceptable, and voila! You don't need to stress so much about who you are and what you want. It might even provide a superficial sense of belonging to a label group. "Marketing", "Creative stuff", "Hospitality", "Outdoors", "Media", "Entrepreneurship", and a few other labels get tossed around.

But these labels make self-knowledge harder, not easier. They provide the illusion of self-knowledge and direction, and distract from the fact that they have no substance. When you ask, "OK, marketing. What kinds of specific activities do you want to do for people?" the illusion crumbles. The dawning realization that, despite the label (partly because of it), you have no idea what you mean by it or what you want.

Same goes for lifestyle labels like, "Travel", "Remote work", "Passive income", "Work I'm passionate about", "Social entrepreneurship". No one is hiring any of those. People are paying money to get specific problems solved that are valuable to them. Which problems do you plan to solve? How will you leverage your skill in solving those problems into a lifestyle you want?

It's better to eschew labels altogether until you have a lot of clear self-knowledge. When you don't, they stymie the process of getting it and lure you into thinking the label provides meaning. It doesn't.

Once you have a good deal of self-knowledge and self-honesty, labels can be handy tools to use when communicating to others. Don't confuse them with your true identity, but at a cocktail party, it's nice to have to shorten an uninteresting conversation. I thought I'd have more to say on the usefulness aspect, but I guess that's it.