

Don't Be Afraid of Hard Work

Written by T.K. Coleman.

There comes a point in everyone's life when they realize that hard work is overrated.

Each person in his or her own time will have a moment of epiphany that forces them to respect the complex array of variables that go into the making of a success story.

This epiphany is at once heartbreaking and liberating. Heartbreaking because we're aroused from the comforting illusion that we're in complete control over all the factors that determine our destiny. Liberating because we're freed from the stress of believing that we always need to be hustling and bustling in order to make good things happen.

Stories abound of people who toil day and night only to suffer the disillusionment of a world that doesn't always honor a rigorous day's work. We're also flooded with movies and TV shows illustrating the emptiness and regret of the person who spends too much time at the office and too little time doing things like sitting by the ocean, watching the sunset, gazing at the night sky, conversing with friends, watching the children grow up, and so forth.

These narratives have created a legitimate demand for task management systems and other approaches to work that can help people minimize the harmful effects of the daily grind. A great deal of self-help and personal development now centers around the idea of showing us how to hack productivity, how to optimize creativity, and how to get more results out of less effort.

And I love every bit of this cultural shift towards making work more fulfilling and less stressful. I wholeheartedly believe that everyone on the planet could benefit from learning how to simplify their workload and increase their efficiency, BUT...

I also believe that we're running the risk of forgetting one very important, empirically attested fact:

Hard work isn't a sufficient condition for fulfillment and success, but for most of us, it's very likely a necessary one.

In his advice to other artists, Pablo Picasso counseled "Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist."

That is, there's no point in reinventing or rebelling against the rules if you're completely clueless about what the rules are, why they were established in the first place, and how they can be useful in certain contexts. Some people are so eager to be unorthodox (or so afraid of being seen as rigidly orthodox) that they wholly disregard the valuable lessons to be learned from custom and convention.

I consider Picasso's observation concerning art to be true of hard work:

You have to know what it means to step outside of your comfort zones, push yourself, and work vigorously before it means anything to master a bunch of techniques for hacking your schedule. After all, you can't optimize a process unless the process has already begun. Optimization isn't a precursor for action. Optimization is an aide to action. You have to act before you optimize. You have to learn how to hustle before you learn how to hack.

It's easy for people to make the fallacious leap from "hard work isn't everything" to "hard work isn't anything." We may very well be a culture guilty of working too much, but that doesn't mean we should abandon the idea that there's such a thing as working too little.

I travel the country giving talks and lectures at dozens of colleges, high schools, churches, and conferences per year, and I'm noticing a trend among many young people: a fear of becoming an overworked adult who wastes 30 years doing meaningless work. These sincere and well-meaning students are disenchanted and discouraged when they see us adults running around looking stressed and exhausted by our jobs. And the last thing they ever want to become is us. But for many of them, this fear translates into an inability to stick with any tasks beyond the point where it ceases to be fun or "spiritually fulfilling." "If I work on something for a longer period than what feels exciting, I'll end up being trapped with a meaningless soul-sucking job until I'm too old to change things" many of them seem to think.

This weekend, I gave two talks on the value of entrepreneurial thinking for artists at the Moving Picture Institute. The seminar was attended by several young business and film students. During a panel discussion, someone asked the CEO of a production company for advice on how to be successful in highly competitive fields. His advice was interesting:

"Be more of a worker than a dreamer. Everybody claims to be creative and passionate nowadays, but nobody knows how to work hard anymore. If you can consistently work eight-hour days, you'll be way ahead of most people. It sounds sad, I know, but the bar is that low. Nothing is harder to find than a young person who can be consistently reliable with executing ideas and following through on the things they start."

I have no interest in debating people about how big of a problem we have in this country with young people being afraid of hard work, but I thought I'd pass this CEO's advice along in case you happen to be one of those people who struggle with the fear of

getting stuck with a monotonous life as a result of working too hard.

Take it (or leave it) for what it's worth, but I've had several business owners over the years tell me about "creative-types" who came to them seeking opportunities, but who were turned away because they hadn't proven their ability to stick with something for longer than a few weeks or a few months.

Contrary to the contemporary fad of mocking the "follow your passion" idea, I'm one of those people who still believes that you should follow your passion. But here's the key: If you give up on your passions when obstacles, inconveniences, and hardships get in your way, then you're not actually following your passion. You're following your obstacles, inconveniences, and hardships. If you truly want to follow your passion, then you have to keep pursuing it even when stuff gets in your way. That's the difference between following something versus just focusing on it when it happens to be standing in front of your face.

If you're a young person reading this, here's my two cents for you:

Follow your passion, but don't mistake that for having it easy all the time. Go after your dreams, but keep going after them even when they drag you through a muddy pile of hard work. Don't guilt-trip yourself into doing things you hate, but love your goals enough to hustle beyond the happy hours of comfort and convenience.

Being creative in today's world means so much more than having a big imagination and a cool personality. It also means having the sense of artistry to create massive opportunities out of mundane tasks. It also means having an imagination that's big enough to discover new ways to manufacture your own inspiration as you navigate the peaks and valleys of the creative process.

In your quest to create a 4-hour work week, don't forget about the value of the 40-hour work week. Freedom *from* hard work is often the reward of learning to find freedom *in* hard work.

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