

The last blue Monday?

One of many dark nights of the soul on Highway One (2014):

I turned onto Highway One at 10:30 PM, in a sudden sting of gloom. Can I make it through another dreary week? It wasn't that the day had been notably stressful, as so many have been of late. The to-do list was straightforward, there were no grueling meetings, no last-minute troubleshooting had landed on my desk. But still— it was only Monday!

Amidst the 'thunking' of the wipers, a bitter truth stung to mind: for upwards of thirty-five years I have struggled against the feeling that paid work, in essence, *must* be miserable. In the ten minutes to the Cape Horn turn off, I reflected on this unshakable belief:

Harkening to the grimness of the Book of Genesis (*'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground'*) my incipient notions of 'work' were generally shared among fellow heathens of my youth. 'Real' work, *e.g.* tarring a roof in the hot sun, shoveling manure, grave-digging— had to be sweaty and demeaning. The better the pay, the greater the humiliation...

It was unimaginable among my village cohort that work could be meaningful. No teacher or parent ever exhorted their charges to find a way of getting paid to do what they loved best. "*Follow your bliss*" in that era would have been taken to be synonymous with "*Tune in, turn on and drop out.*"

It was not that my cohort entirely lacked ambition or were without secret dreams. Yet aptitude or talent was never connected to the grim need to make money. That grim need was usually determined by the length of time required to qualify for UIC benefits...

So it was that more than one budding guitarist—even an odd poet—resigned themselves to dirty unskilled work. As for making music or poetry— after a mind-numbing day on a construction site, there was little appetite left for much more than debauchery. So it was that both livers and dreams were gradually poisoned...

As for this old villager: he nurtured a modest hope that a few years of college and emigration across the continent would put some distance between himself and the native fatalism. Yet unavoidably— the transplantation still carried residues from the native soil...

It took him a few years to muster the self-confidence to pursue something better than library book shelver and 'home care support' worker. When he did fall into teaching, that was primarily for the opportunity to sojourn in tropical environs. The passion that presumably draws the most committed teachers to their vocation was shamefully slight. It should be no surprise that at the entrance of classroom doorways over the subsequent

thirty-five years, he so often had to brace himself. Even when lessons seemed to go well— even when students were most happy—he wondered how he could possibly enjoy it. Something *had* to be amiss. Without the elements of self-punishment and humiliation— getting paid to teach— could *only* be cheating...

In that thought, I checked the blind spot and crossed into the right lane.

How many others manage to make it through thirty-five years of beating themselves up almost every day? The damage thereby wrought has probably been no less than that suffered by those old comrades who endured their work only through heavy drink. Meanwhile, there were the taunting speculations of ‘real’ careers missed and self-fulfillment shriveled by the Calvinistic poisoning...

Still, as the exit sign loomed up in the mist— it struck that it all might have gone worse— *far* worse. At least I survived with mind-body relatively intact— and mercifully, I will have a decent pension. At the same time, a cleaving away from teaching will not involve the crisis of identity which so many fear upon retirement. Not having located identity or self-worth in a career does have, in the long run, that one consolation... Then even in this very late stage maybe there is a new act— a more deeply fulfilling identity— yet to emerge. For this possibility is profound gratitude not in order?

In that thought and in the click of the turn signal light— Friday did not seem quite so far away...

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