

RIP's notes and highlights from Paul Graham's 2006 essay "How to do what you Love"

<http://www.paulgraham.com/love.html>

- *Once, when I was about 9 or 10, my father told me I could be whatever I wanted when I grew up, so long as I enjoyed it. I remember that precisely because it seemed so anomalous. It was like being told to use dry water. Whatever I thought he meant, I didn't think he meant work could literally be fun—fun like playing. It took me years to grasp that.*
- *The most dangerous liars can be the kids' own parents. **If you take a boring job to give your family a high standard of living, as so many people do, you risk infecting your kids with the idea that work is boring.** Maybe it would be better for kids in this one case if parents were not so unselfish. A parent who set an example of loving their work might help their kids more than an expensive house.*
 - My Note: holy shit, you're talking to me?
- *It was not till I was in college that **the idea of work finally broke free from the idea of making a living.** Then the important question became not how to make money, but what to work on. The definition of work was now to make some original contribution to the world, and in the process not to starve.*
 - My Note: that's what I lack: entrepreneurship mindset. If you have such a mindset, FIRE is meaningless. You'd be already living a post-FI life. [Confidence.](#)
- *Work still seemed to require discipline, because only hard problems yielded grand results, and hard problems couldn't literally be fun. If you think **something's supposed to hurt, you're less likely to notice if you're doing it wrong.***
- ***How much are you supposed to like what you do?** Unless you know that, you don't know when to stop searching. And if, like most people, you underestimate it, you'll tend to stop searching too early. You'll end up doing something chosen for you by your parents, or the desire to make money, or prestige—or sheer inertia.*
- *It used to perplex me when I read about **people who liked what they did so much that there was nothing they'd rather do.** There didn't seem to be any sort of work I liked that much. If I had a choice of (a) spending the next hour working on something or (b) be teleported to Rome and spend the next hour wandering about, was there any sort of work I'd prefer? Honestly, no.*
- *But the fact is, almost anyone would rather, at any given moment, float about in the Carribean, or have sex, or eat some delicious food, than work on hard problems. **The rule about doing what you love assumes a certain length of time.** It doesn't mean, do what will make you happiest this second, but what will make you happiest over some longer period, like a week or a month.*
 - My Note: Hedonism sucks. Being miserable sucks as well. Let's find the middle way.

- *Unproductive pleasures pall eventually. After a while you get tired of lying on the beach. If you want to stay happy, **you have to do something**.*
- *As a lower bound, you have to **like your work more than any unproductive pleasure**. You have to like what you do enough that the concept of "spare time" seems mistaken. If your work is not your favorite thing to do, you'll have terrible problems with **procrastination**. You'll have to force yourself to work, and when you resort to that the results are distinctly inferior.*
- ***To be happy I think you have to be doing something you not only enjoy, but admire.** You have to be able to say, at the end, **wow, that's pretty cool**. This doesn't mean you have to make something. If you learn how to hang glide, or to speak a foreign language fluently, that will be enough to make you say, for a while at least, wow, that's pretty cool. **What there has to be is a test.***
- *So one thing that falls just short of the standard, I think, is reading books. Except for some books in math and the hard sciences, **there's no test of how well you've read a book**, and that's why merely reading books doesn't quite feel like work. You have to do something with what you've read to feel productive.*
 - My note: ouch, a bit unexpected... but it makes sense. Maybe with PKM we can "read a book better", and you can be proud of how much you remember of a book. There's a way to test how well you read a book now.
- *I think the best test is one Gino Lee taught me: **to try to do things that would make your friends say wow**. But it probably wouldn't start to work properly till about age 22, because most people haven't had a big enough sample to pick friends from before then.*
- *My Note: I don't totally agree with the Prestige session, maybe it talks at a higher level of satisfaction. I think that a young kid could aim for prestige, there's nothing bad with it. Probably somewhere at mid career you should not seek prestige early, but get your head down and build stuff.*
- ***Prestige is especially dangerous to the ambitious.** If you want to make ambitious people waste their time on errands, the way to do it is to bait the hook with prestige. That's the recipe for getting people to give talks, write forewords, serve on committees, be department heads, and so on. It might be a good rule simply to avoid any prestigious task. If it didn't suck, they wouldn't have had to make it prestigious.*
 - My note: Ditto!
- *Similarly, if you admire two kinds of work equally, but **one is more prestigious, you should probably choose the other**. Your opinions about what's admirable are always going to be slightly influenced by prestige, so if the two seem equal to you, you probably have more genuine admiration for the less prestigious one.*
 - my note: did I do the same choosing between Mr V's job and Academic Institute?
- *The other big force leading people astray is **money**. Money by itself is not that dangerous. When something pays well but is regarded with contempt, like telemarketing, or prostitution, or personal injury litigation, ambitious people aren't tempted by it. That kind of work ends up being done by people who are "just trying to make a living." (Tip: avoid any field whose practitioners say this.) **The danger is when money is combined with prestige**, as in, say, corporate law, or medicine. A comparatively safe and*

prosperous career with some automatic baseline prestige is dangerously tempting to someone young, who hasn't thought much about what they really like.

- My note: Hooli...
- *The test of whether people love what they do is whether **they'd do it even if they weren't paid for it**—even if they had to work at another job to make a living.*
 - My note: RIP!
- *How many corporate lawyers would do their current work if they had to do it for free, in their spare time, and take day jobs as waiters to support themselves?*
- ***The advice of parents will tend to err on the side of money.** It seems safe to say there are more undergrads who want to be novelists and whose parents want them to be doctors than who want to be doctors and whose parents want them to be novelists.*
 - My Note: I'm not going to do this with BabyRIP
- *All parents tend to be more conservative for their kids than they would for themselves, simply because, as parents, **they share risks more than rewards.** If your eight year old son decides to climb a tall tree, or your teenage daughter decides to date the local bad boy, **you won't get a share in the excitement**, but if your son falls, or your daughter gets pregnant, **you'll have to deal with the consequences.***
 - My Note: this is an amazing point! I've never seen it under these lens.
- ***It's hard to find work you love;** it must be, if so few do. So don't underestimate this task. And don't feel bad if you haven't succeeded yet. In fact, **if you admit to yourself that you're discontented, you're a step ahead of most people, who are still in denial.***
 - My Note: Henry David Thoreau's said "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation".
- ***Some people are lucky enough to know what they want to do when they're 12,** and just glide along as if they were on railroad tracks. But this seems the exception. More often people who do great things have careers with the trajectory of a ping-pong ball. They go to school to study A, drop out and get a job doing B, and then become famous for C after taking it up on the side.*
- *Sometimes jumping from one sort of work to another is a sign of energy, and sometimes it's a sign of laziness. Are you dropping out, or boldly carving a new path? You often can't tell yourself. **Plenty of people who will later do great things seem to be disappointments early on, when they're trying to find their niche.***
- *Is there some test you can use to keep yourself honest? **One is to try to do a good job at whatever you're doing, even if you don't like it.** Then at least **you'll know you're not using dissatisfaction as an excuse for being lazy.** Perhaps more importantly, you'll get into the habit of doing things well.*
 - My Note: again, amazing point.
- *Another test you can use is: **always produce.** For example, if you have a day job you don't take seriously because you plan to be a novelist, are you producing? Are you writing pages of fiction, however bad? As long as you're producing, you'll know you're not merely using the hazy vision of the grand novel you plan to write one day as an opiate.*

- **"Always produce" is also a heuristic for finding the work you love.** If you subject yourself to that constraint, it will automatically push you away from things you think you're supposed to work on, toward things you actually like. "Always produce" will discover your life's work the way water, with the aid of gravity, finds the hole in your roof.
 - My Note: Bingo! always produce - and you'll find your passion. Actually it finds you. It resonates with Cal Newport's model of the serendipitous and iterative process of building your passion.
- Of course, figuring out what you like to work on doesn't mean you get to work on it. That's a separate question. And if you're ambitious you have to keep them separate: **you have to make a conscious effort to keep your ideas about what you want from being contaminated by what seems possible.**
- It's painful to keep them apart, because it's painful to observe the gap between them. So most people pre-emptively lower their expectations. **For example, if you asked random people on the street if they'd like to be able to draw like Leonardo, you'd find most would say something like "Oh, I can't draw."** This is more a statement of intention than fact; it means, I'm not going to try. Because the fact is, if you took a random person off the street and somehow got them to work as hard as they possibly could at drawing for the next twenty years, they'd get surprisingly far. But it would require a great moral effort; it would mean staring failure in the eye every day for years. And so to protect themselves people say "I can't."
- Another related line you often hear is that not everyone can do work they love—that **someone has to do the unpleasant jobs.** Really? **How do you make them?** In the US the only mechanism for forcing people to do unpleasant jobs is the draft, and that hasn't been invoked for over 30 years. All we can do is encourage people to do unpleasant work, with money and prestige.
 - My Note: Paul, what's that you want to tell me?
- **If there's something people still won't do, it seems as if society just has to make do without.** That's what happened with **domestic servants.** For millennia that was the canonical example of a job "someone had to do." And yet in the mid twentieth century servants practically disappeared in rich countries, and the rich have just had to do without.
 - My Note: **fuck, this is mind blowing... and so true!**
- So while there may be some things someone has to do, there's a good chance anyone saying that about any particular job is mistaken. **Most unpleasant jobs would either get automated or go undone if no one were willing to do them.**
 - My Note: I can't agree enough!
- There's another sense of "not everyone can do work they love" that's all too true, however. **One has to make a living,** and it's hard to get paid for doing work you love. There are two routes to that destination:
 - The organic route: as you become more eminent, **gradually to increase the parts of your job that you like at the expense of those you don't.**
 - The two-job route: **to work at things you don't like to get money to work on things you do.**

- *The organic route is more common. It happens naturally to anyone who does good work.*
- *The two-job route has several variants depending on how long you work for money at a time. At one extreme is the "day job," where you work regular hours at one job to make money, and work on what you love in your spare time. At the other extreme you work at something till you make **enough** not to have to work for money again.*
 - My Note: **FIRE!** Well, he linked his 2004 essay [How to Make Wealth](#), that I hadn't read yet.
- ***The two-job route is less common than the organic route, because it requires a deliberate choice. It's also more dangerous. Life tends to get more expensive as you get older, so it's easy to get sucked into working longer than you expected at the money job.***
 - My note: it looks like [The Optionality Trap](#)
- *Worse still, **anything you work on changes you.** If you work too long on tedious stuff, it will rot your brain. **And the best paying jobs are most dangerous, because they require your full attention.***
- *The advantage of the two-job route is that it lets you jump over obstacles. The landscape of possible jobs isn't flat; there are walls of varying heights between different kinds of work. The trick of maximizing the parts of your job that you like can get you from architecture to product design, but not, probably, to music. If you make money doing one thing and then work on another, you have more freedom of choice.*
 - My Note: I'm not sure I fully got this point...
- *Which route should you take? That depends on **how sure you are of what you want to do, how good you are at taking orders, how much risk you can stand, and the odds that anyone will pay (in your lifetime) for what you want to do.***
 - My Note: **this is... the bible.** I don't know why I hadn't found this essay before.
- *If you're sure of the general area you want to work in and it's something people are likely to pay you for, then you should probably take the organic route. But if you don't know what you want to work on, or don't like to take orders, you may want to take the two-job route, if you can stand the risk.*
 - My Note: I don't understand why if I "don't like to take orders" I should take the two jobs rule. Maybe he assumes that the job that makes a living is mostly mindless and I'm there just for the money and won't take the job seriously.
- *Don't decide too soon. **Kids who know early what they want to do seem impressive, as if they got the answer to some math question before the other kids. They have an answer, certainly, but odds are it's wrong.***
 - My Note: finally! It seemed strange to me that when he addressed the kids who know what to do at age 12 he didn't mention that they don't know shit :)
- *A friend of mine who is a quite successful doctor complains constantly about her job. When people applying to medical school ask her for advice, she wants to shake them and yell "Don't do it!" (But she never does.) How did she get into this fix? In high school she already wanted to be a doctor. And she is so ambitious and determined that she overcame every obstacle along the way—including, unfortunately, not liking it. Now **she has a life chosen for her by a high-school kid.***

- My Note: haha! Never seen from this angle!
- *When you're young, you're given the impression that you'll get enough information to make each choice before you need to make it. But this is certainly not so with work. **When you're deciding what to do, you have to operate on ridiculously incomplete information.** Even in college you get little idea what various types of work are like. At best you may have a couple internships, but not all jobs offer internships, and those that do don't teach you much more about the work than being a batboy teaches you about playing baseball.*
- *In the design of lives, as in the design of most other things, you get better results if you use **flexible** media. So unless you're fairly sure what you want to do, **your best bet may be to choose a type of work that could turn into either an organic or two-job career.** That was probably part of **the reason I chose computers.** You can be a professor, or make a lot of money, or morph it into any number of other kinds of work.*
- *It's also wise, early on, **to seek jobs that let you do many different things, so you can learn faster what various kinds of work are like.** Conversely, the extreme version of **the two-job route is dangerous because it teaches you so little about what you like.** If you work hard at being a bond trader for ten years, thinking that you'll quit and write novels when you have enough money, what happens when you quit and then discover that you don't actually like writing novels?*
 - My Note: so true.
- ***Most people would say, I'd take that problem. Give me a million dollars and I'll figure out what to do.** But it's harder than it looks. **Constraints give your life shape. Remove them and most people have no idea what to do:** look at what happens to those who win lotteries or inherit money. **Much as everyone thinks they want financial security, the happiest people are not those who have it, but those who like what they do.** So a plan that promises freedom at the expense of knowing what to do with it may not be as good as it seems.*
 - My Note: I get it. **This idea is finding his way into my head.** [Naval Ravikant](#) says the same. [Jim Carrey](#) says the same. [The Optionality Trap](#) says the same.
- *Whichever route you take, expect a struggle. Finding work you love is very difficult. Most people fail. **Even if you succeed, it's rare to be free to work on what you want till your thirties or forties.** But if you have the destination in sight you'll be more likely to arrive at it. **If you know you can love work, you're in the home stretch, and if you know what work you love, you're practically there.***