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Follow Your Bliss - A Follow-Up

'Advice I Wish I'd Had'

Last February, I [responded](#) on Twitter to a tweet from *The Times* urging young journalists to apply for the Anthony Howard Award. Lucky winners could spend a year writing about politics for *The Times* and *Observer* newspapers, and also for *New Statesman* magazine. My comment:

'Forget it. Don't write for the "mainstream". Don't write for money. Don't write for prestige. Just "follow your bliss" by writing what you absolutely love to write to inspire and enlighten other people. Write what seems interesting, important and true, and give it away for free.'

These few words generated an imperfect storm of anger and abuse, mostly from corporate journalists and other media workers. In a piece titled, 'Write for love not money? Journalists appalled,' former Guardian journalist Jonathan Cook [commented](#): 'the outpouring of indignation from these journalists at a little bit of advice from Media Lens must be unprecedented'.

It was certainly the most hostile response we had ever received. I [wrote](#) about 'blissgate' in a media alert on March 7. By contrast to the tweet, the feedback was wonderfully positive. One reader sent a relevant [link](#) with this note:

'The creative philosophy you eloquently espoused in your recent article was the very foundation of The Amateur Cinema League founded in New York in 1926.'

Another reader, describing himself as a 'Quaker/Yogi/Buddhist/Environmentalist', wrote:

'Dear David(s),
'You could not be more correct in what you say. EVERYBODY should follow their bliss and never, ever be deflected from that path by the false lure of money, prestige and fame. Then we would not be heading toward the collective apocalypse that is fast approaching us. For survival you might need to do work that does not accord with your bliss but never do so much of it that you have no time or energy left over for your bliss.'

Former journalist Steve Tooze [vented](#) some long-held frustration:

'20 years as a corporate journalist left me feeling like a s**t who slaved for s**ts writing s**t. These guys faced a barrage of outrage from my former colleagues for giving out advice I wish I'd had in 1985'

Another reader sent this from poet John Keats:

'With respect to my livelihood, I will not write for it,  for I will not run with that most vulgar of all crowds, the literary.  John Keats, March 8, 1818.'

Someone sent a poem by Emily Dickinson, which begins:

**'Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man –
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing'**

The sender parodied the abuse we had received:

'However I must caution that Emily Dickinson is not to be trusted as she is clearly as insane as you two. The mad hatter self published (because no one would publish her!! because she had tits) and gave it away for free.

'But alas she is no saint merely an upperclass champagne socialist self indulged twat whose daddy pays for everything. Oh well can't have it all I suppose.'

Someone else emailed a wonderful quote from Krishnamurti:

'Very much in line with your advice, Krishnamurti wrote:

'''Have you ever thought about it? We want to be famous as a writer, as a poet, as a painter, as a politician, as a singer, or what you will. Why? Because we really don't love what we are doing. If you loved to sing, or to paint, or to write poems, if you really loved it you would not be concerned with whether you are famous or not. To want to be famous is tawdry, trivial, stupid, it has no meaning; but, because we don't love what we are doing, we want to enrich ourselves with fame. Our present education is rotten because it teaches us to love success and not what we are doing. The result has become more important than the action.

'You know, it is good to hide your brilliance under a bushel, to be anonymous, to love what you are doing and not to show off. It is good to be kind without a name. That does not make you famous, it does not cause your photograph to appear in the newspapers. Politicians do not come to your door. You are just a creative human being living anonymously, and in that there is richness and great beauty.' - Krishnamurti, J. Krishnamurti, The Book of Life'

My purpose in writing the alert was to make clear that the advice to 'follow your bliss' was not mere New Age twaddle, and it wasn't cynicism (some tweeters seemed to think we were a media company hoping to exploit young journalists). And it wasn't simply Media Lens being arseholier than thou in preaching our 'Virtue' to lesser mortals gutter-grubbing for a dirty dollar.

To do this, I had to link the advice to the well-known comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell rather than my own experience. I couldn't mention that I had actually lived the advice given – the reason I tweeted it in the first place – without looking impossibly pompous and self-righteous to people I had enraged. To avoid causing complete confusion, I also had to resist mentioning my own reservations about Campbell's 'follow your bliss' formula.

Dying Inside – Dying Outside

When I worked in sales, sales management and management consultancy – that is, when I was guided by a money motivation to do work I found utterly boring - I became keenly aware of two key problems with all corporate work:

1) Everything that happens inside a corporation is goal-oriented. Everything is justifiable, or not, on the basis of its contribution to the corporate bottom line: maximised revenues in minimum time at minimum cost. This means that everything that happens is guided by the head not the heart, by what needs to be rather than what is, by insincerity rather than soul. We are to smile, shake hands, talk, dress and behave guided by thoughts rather than feeling: namely, thoughts of how best to maximise profits.

Head-based behaviour rooted in corporate goals, rather than in how we feel and who we fundamentally are, is inhuman. I am free to be myself at work, but only insofar as it is profit-friendly. I am necessarily a fraud. I can joke and chit-chat, but I cannot do or express anything in public that questions or threatens the smooth-running of the corporate enterprise. Conflicting thoughts, distracting questions – about profit, planet, life, death, ethics, the nature of awareness, being, happiness - are obviously as absurd as they would be for a football player on the pitch trying to win the World Cup final. We are there to do a job, to make money - everything else is a distraction at best, obstructive at worst.

So all relationships at work must be superficial, fake – we must be trivial, hidden behind masks of positivity and goal-seeking aggression. The head rules, the flow of feeling from the heart is cauterised, blocked. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood the modern world that was emerging around him in the 1750s:

'We no longer dare seem what we really are, but lie under a perpetual restraint... Thus we never know with whom we have to deal... What a train of vices must attend this uncertainty! Sincere friendship, real esteem, and perfect confidence are banished from among men. Jealousy, suspicion, fear, coldness, reserve, hate, and fraud lie constantly concealed under that uniform and deceitful veil of politeness...' (J.J. Rousseau, 'Discourses Sur Les Arts Et Sciences,' 1750)

We witness the fully-formed result on our tin can commuter trains and buses, packed with uniform-suits, thumbs twitching manically across touch-screens. To be sure, some have been 'liberated' from the need to wear a choking neck tie, some from the need to be strangled by fixed office hours. But pitiful indeed are the hippy affectations of the Googles and Apples. Google employee 107's job title [read](#) 'Jolly Good Fellow'; his task: 'working on solving unhappiness'. Behind the giggles, the iron rule of profit is as unbending as ever.

When we submit ourselves to corporate fundamentalism – to the imperative that profit matters most – we are living from the cold, hard, superficial, loveless, bloodless, dream-like, goal-oriented, thinking mind. When our life is forcibly disconnected from authentic feelings and behaviour – from our love, joy, passion, compassion, generosity and sincere self-expression – they dry up. Our interest, happiness and sense of actually being alive all start to wither.

We can conduct a litmus test for the condition of being head-trapped, disconnected from feeling. We can present words like 'love', 'compassion' and 'kindness' to our minds: head-trapped humans will cringe, blanch and writhe at the mere mention of such words, just as they did in large numbers in response to my tweeted talk of 'bliss'. As Somerset Maugham wrote:

'Sentimentality is only sentiment that rubs you up the wrong way.' (Maugham, 'A Writer's Notebook', Penguin, 1993, p.291)

The sight of the word 'love' sends a signal from the head to the heart; but the link is broken, nothing gets through. Memories are stirred from childhood when love for our parents, for the

girl or boy of our dreams, for a beloved pet, for our friends was real, vibrant – when it was simply everything to us. For the head-trapped corporate human this is a painful memory – it reminds of how much feeling, how much idealism, has been lost. Hence the anger, the rage. My critics weren't raging at my tweet because they disagreed with the idealism, but because it tortured them with what they perceive to be a painfully impossible dream.

2) In my work life, I also quickly became aware that a global society dominated by the corporate profit motive must inevitably be incompatible with human survival on a finite planet.

I experienced every day the fanatical, short-term nature of corporate concern. If profit-orientation shapes our every gesture, smile and interaction at work, then it of course shapes every aspect of our relationship with the world around us. If I have to crush my own personality to fit the bottom line, what chance Third World societies living on 'our' oil? What chance an animal that could be an obstacle, or exploited, in some way? What chance future generations dependent on a stable climate? None of them can be allowed to matter – there is literally no space for that concern on the bottom line. Caring is as illogical as gazing out of the window when you could be making another tele-sales call.

This is so deeply ingrained that even the astonishing heatwaves last summer right across the globe triggered almost no political or media alarm. While the morgues of Montreal overflowed, 22,000 people in Japan were hospitalised as a result of the heat, 4.5 million farm animals in South Korea died from heatstroke (offering a very clear glimpse of how food supplies may one day collapse), thousands of fish close to death were moved from Swiss lakes that were too warm, and so on. Since writing this, dozens of people have been burned to death, with hundreds still missing, in California's unprecedented forest fires. The Media Matters website [found](#) that just 3.7 per cent of US TV segments aired by ABC, CBS and NBC mentioned the link between climate change and the wildfires, thus simply ignoring the [view](#) of leading climate scientists.

Despite everything we are seeing, corporate humanity remains glued to the bottom line, our eyes blind, our hearts cauterised. From the corporate perspective, actively caring about the consequences for the victims is immoral (indeed [illegal](#)), if it costs the company.

It seemed completely obvious to me in the 1980s that, if not obstructed, this worldview would quickly and inevitably send us over the cliff of environmental limits. This is much clearer now, of course, and I have to admit that I did not know that climate change might actually kill me – I assumed these changes happened over hundreds of years.

To summarise very briefly (see my [book](#) 'Free to be Human', Green Books, 1995, for more discussion), Campbell's advice made sense of both points above in a way that allowed me to make a big change in my life. I interpreted him as saying, in effect:

When you build your life around a profit motive, you are rooting your life in dead capital, in head-trapped obsession with efficiency and profit. In an individual, the result is experienced as a sense of deadness, alienation, boredom. Globally, the result manifests as a shadow of death spreading across the world: dying rainforests, blazing wildfires, dead seabirds stuffed with plastic, extinct species, chickens and pigs crammed and tortured, Baghdad blitzed and burning, and the destruction of a climate capable of supporting human life (In recent months, we have seen the same US air force, whose bombing started innumerable fires in Iraq and Libya, bombing Californian fires with water to extinguish them. The root cause of both actions – a rampant oil industry with its pathological, bottom-line logic prioritising profit over people and planet).

Campbell helped me realise that I was not facing any kind of personal-global conflict: abandoning my corporate career did not mean doing the 'right' thing ethically at my own expense personally. I would not be swapping my suit for a hair shirt. By stepping off the career ladder, I was doing the right thing for myself and everyone else. As Campbell wrote:

'Find where it [your bliss] is, and don't be afraid to follow it... In doing that you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalises, there's no doubt about it. The world without spirit is a wasteland... The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself.' (Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, 'The Power of Myth', Doubleday, 1988, p.149)

That was the answer: I had to empty the tedious, deadening money motivation from my heart and mind, and replace it with something alive, something rooted in feeling, not goal-orientation. In my case, that was writing and reading about what makes me happy and unhappy, about what makes others happy and unhappy, about finding solutions to the human condition. This was my great interest, my great passion and delight. I would make my love of these things the centre of my life.

Find, Not Follow

And this brings me to my problem with the advice to 'follow your bliss'. Campbell's exhortation encouraged people to focus on becoming skilled at doing – we have to 'follow' our talent in writing, painting, music, dance. He warned, for example, that we must be prepared to labour for ten years before receiving any recognition at all. But in fact, following your bliss is about being rather than doing. And as Krishnamurti said, it has nothing at all to do with recognition, 'achievement', which should not be any kind of concern, and which may in fact make it harder to remain sincere.

People have claimed to be following their bliss by giving up their corporate jobs and devoting themselves to hedonism, or political activism, or war reporting, or running marathons. People may even be 'trying to save the world'. But that, too, is goal-orientation. That, too, is living from the painfully ambitious, egotistical, frustrated head rather than the juicy, delighted heart. Not, of course, that it is wrong to write out of compassion. In fact, focusing on doing what we love for the love of doing it facilitates the flow of compassion.

The problem is that these exertions may well give the ego short-lived pleasure – attention, fame, applause - that feels like a kind of 'bliss'. We can know that this is mere ego pleasure, because it burns rather than cools us; leaves us feeling dissatisfied, frustrated, wanting more. The problem is that Campbell's formulation lends itself to this ambitious extroversion. It suggests that we can follow our bliss 'out there', whereas the enlightened mystics have all offered the same advice: turn within.

The key, actually, is to find, not follow, your bliss. This is called the 'pathless path' because it is 'travelled' the instant we realise the futility of all paths. The suggestion is that being - simple awareness of the present moment - is inherently blissful. So why are we haunted by misery and dissatisfaction? Because we are never awake to the present moment. Why? Because we are never 'here', never 'now', but always lost in our heads, in dreams of bliss in some future moment, or in memories of the past. Thought is hot air, dreams of bliss are not bliss. The enlightened masters invite us to consider that we are constantly haunted by a sense of dissatisfaction and failure because we are trying to achieve something we already have and

are. If we already are where we need to be, every step we take in search of happiness will take us further away from the very goal we are seeking.

All goal-orientation is an attempt to look for bliss in a future where bliss does not exist because the future does not exist except as a thought in the mind. Meditation involves dropping all such attempts. Instead, we look at where we are for the first time and are astonished by what we find. Notice, then, that meditation is not just another 'bourgeois' hobby that we append to our busy lives, like wine-tasting and yoga. Meditation is one of only two choices: it is the alternative to failing to find happiness in a million ways outside ourselves. It is absolutely fundamental. It is the other answer to the suffering of the human condition.

And it involves a surprisingly straight forward reorientation. We can simply focus on our breath, the tingling in our fingers, the emotions in our chest, and find bliss. But it means taking a break from the long obsession with finding solutions and hope in the future. It means we are directing attention away from the agonising fantasy world of our minds to the present reality of our bodies and the physical world around us. These are experienced as delightful.

'Following your bliss' means finding that inner delight and allowing it to overflow in your life. It might overflow as a friendly smile to a stranger on the street, but we are not 'following our bliss' by smiling. We are not, god help us, trying to increase the warmth and quantity of our smiling to 'make the world a better place'. It is precisely this head-trapped goal-orientation that has made the world a worse place.

The effort is not to reject goals through will-power but to perceive the futility of goals by developing an acuity of awareness, so that we can feel how goal-orientation delivers us to our cold, loveless, desolate heads; so that we can feel how resting in the moment observing our physical sensations and emotions - our sadness, anxiety, jealousy, lust and anger – unveils the delight of being.

We then might, or might not, want to express and share that delight in a poem, a play, a song, a dance, a political or philosophical article, a moment of chit-chat, making someone a cup of tea. But none of this is essential. We don't 'follow our bliss' through writing, as I once thought. We find our bliss and may express it in some way through writing. It is the being that matters, not the doing. Eventually, we may drop any specific doing altogether.

After all, the enlightened mystic Lazy An was famous for doing nothing at all. Buddhist monks beg, but Lazy An could not be bothered with all that. He just sat silently blissful, enjoying the sunbeams, the breeze, the birdsong. It is said that his joy and peacefulness were so luminous, so enchanting, that he was beloved by everyone - people brought him food, blankets and protected him. When it rained, Lazy An just got wet, so he was carried to a place of shelter. An never troubled to ask where he was being taken. He was filled with bliss, and his presence filled everyone around him with the same delight. But can we say he was 'following his bliss'? Hardly.

Most of the people who have truly 'followed their bliss' have not danced at the Bolshoi, or dazzled Bill Moyers with their mythological expertise. They have found it in their hearts as they watch the rise and fall of their dog's chest as she sleeps on her bed. They have found it in the sound of someone turning the pages of a book, or in the light that reflects from a child's eyes. Lao Tzu found it while watching a dead leaf falling from a tree – the leaf was doing, Lao Tzu was being. In fact, the leaf was also not doing...

David Edwards is co-editor of www.medialens.org

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Contact Us:

editor@medialens.org