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The Self at Work

From Job-Hunters to Artist-Entrepreneurs

"I am not a businessman, I am an artist."
—Warren Buffett

At the end of the twentieth century, wealth—whether earned, inherited, or otherwise acquired—continued to serve as a sign of divine favor, as it had since the late nineteenth century. However, in a culture where a psychotherapeutic ethos had augmented, and, in some cases, supplanted religious beliefs and spiritual traditions, wealth, in and of itself, was no longer sufficient. Self-realization through work was also required as a sign of salvation, whether here or in the hereafter. The journalist David Brooks describes this as the emergence of a new class: "bobos," or bourgeois bohemians, a group for whom wealth earned through some self-fulfilling quest constituted the highest level of achievement.1 While there is some merit to Brooks's observation—that satisfaction in one's work combined with wealth had formed a new couplet signifying success—obtaining the latter became increasingly difficult as real wages declined in the last quarter of the twentieth century (excluding, of course, the speculative bubble of the late 1990s).

As the gap between the wealthy and the poor grew during this period, so did the notion that self-fulfillment might serve as a genuine sign of one's secular salvation. While even the Puritans hoped to link individuals with work that was "agreeable" to each, the late-twentieth-century emphasis on a fulfilling career as the right—and responsibility—of each and every individual,
irrespective of gender, race, or ethnicity, served to motivate a workforce that experienced shattered job security, frequent unemployment, declining real wages, and, when employed, greatly increased work time and productivity expectations. Simultaneously, linking work to self-realization channeled the counterculture value of self-fulfillment back into the productive sphere—back into the workplace. Pleasure in work offered an antidote to ambivalence about pleasure for its own sake. And, perhaps most important, for an economic system that requires the ongoing reduction of production costs, an emerging ideology of creative self-fulfillment in work, even without compensation, emerged as more and more women entered the labor force. If women were no longer willing to work without compensation, who would? Artists, who have been notoriously willing to work for little or nothing, and the idea of working as an artist works, stepped in to fill the gap.

Advice to Job Hunters: Where Necessity Meets the Market

The career advice manual, the job seeker’s guide, is an unusual commodity, in that it exists at a critical juncture positioned between the individual’s needs (for food, shelter, medical care, etc.) and the exigencies of the labor market. The job seeker’s guide offers strategies to workers selling their labor, and in that process reveals the values associated with work, career, and vocation. While the workplace itself may present problems to be managed and negotiated, the absence of gainful employment, unless mitigated by other financial means, constitutes a personal crisis for which career self-help books offer solace and practical advice. The all-time bestselling book in this category is Richard Nelson Bolles’s What Color Is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job Hunters and Career Changers, which is revised annually. With more than 8 million copies in print and translations in twelve languages, Parachute has come to be called the “job hunter’s Bible.”

The comparison to the Bible turns out to be much more than simply a figure of speech. Bolles’s blockbuster was initially self-published in 1970 as part of his counseling work for the Protestant United Ministries in Education. Working as an Episcopalian minister on a college campus, Bolles had observed that a number of the individuals he counseled had difficulty keeping their jobs. He set out to help them by creating a booklet of job-hunting tips. Bolles mailed the 162-page spiral-bound photocopied manuscript to members of the clergy and placed ads for the booklet. The story goes that before long he was receiving orders from across the country: not only from churches but from schools, colleges, corporations, and the career counseling community.

By 1972, Bolles’s booklet was picked up by Ten Speed Press, a publisher whose only other title was a bicycle repair manual. Sales of the book were slow at first but, buoyed by the rising unemployment of the early 1970s and by a new emphasis on career education at the U.S. Office of Education, built steadily until 1979, when the book landed on the New York Times trade paperback bestseller list. It remained on the bestseller list almost continuously for four years, until the beginning of 1984. The success of the job hunter’s manual resulted in a 1975 decision to publish the book as an annual, updated and revised each year. These annual editions are valuable artifacts in tracing the evolution of the job hunter.

For Bolles, the timing of the publication of Parachute could not have been more fortuitous: from 1955 until around 1974, the annual unemployment rate was relatively low, hovering between 5 and 6 percent. Then it began to rise, reaching a peak of nearly 10 percent in 1983. Only at the end of the century (in 1997) did the unemployment rate again drop to below 5 percent. Parachute also benefited from a change in educational policy: the book appeared just as the newly minted term “career education” (replacing the more plebian “vocational education”) became a highly visible influence at the U.S. Office of Education. Beginning in the early 1970s, the Office of Education called for a “revitalized” K–12 education using a curriculum based on the career education theme.

Perhaps the most obvious changes in Parachute across its three decades of revisions are the various transformations of the book’s physical appearance. Over the course of twenty-five years, the volume has swelled from 201 pages in 1972 to 525 pages (divided between 228 pages of text and 297 pages of appendices) in 1997. As sections gained in importance, they were often revised and expanded as appendices. For example, the topic “job-hunting while on the job” is mentioned in the 1981 edition but by 1987 grew into a detailed appendix, where the preponderance of the advice offered is to utilize every moment of one’s leisure time—comings and goings, weekends, lunch breaks, and vacation time—in search of one’s next position. Work at remaining employed overflows into every moment of life.

Cover art for the book changes only gradually: an etching of an airborne team transported by a parachute/balloon hybrid served as the cover illustration for fifteen years, from 1972 through 1987 (see fig. 41). By 1987, the etching...
remains, but the background has been upgraded to include a gestural watercolor wash. Two years later, the image is revamped: the parachute/balloon airship is pictured gliding above a brightly colored tropical landscape. Then, in 1992, perhaps reflecting the sobering situation for job hunters, the tropical paradise is replaced by a somber Arcadian image dominated by dark blues. The balloon image appears only as a minor icon, receding into the distance of a dark landscape. By 1996 the airborne parachute/balloon, in rainbow colors, has returned as the central image on the cover art, and remains in this location until 2002. The edition for that year, produced after the turn-of-the-century collapse of the stock markets, features a gloomy cover with a black and grey background and a small iconic parachute/balloon. While conventional wisdom suggests that one ought not judge a book by its cover, book buyers tend to, and the changes in the tone of the job hunter’s Bible provide a curious barometer of employment outlooks.

Parachute offers specific exercises and activities to assist the unemployed in finding a match between themselves and the labor market. Self-assessment exercises designed to help the “job hunter” identify his or her skills and interests, along with advice on where to find “the person who has the power to hire you” are served up with zany images that lighten what otherwise might seem a grim topic (see fig. 4.2). Inventories of skills, along with story-writing exercises about one’s past accomplishments, charts, graphs, and tables are designed to help the job hunter identify his or her “transferable skills,” that is, his or her skilled labor power that can be sold to a variety of possible employers in a changing labor market. Self-knowledge is offered

as a central component of career success, but knowledge of the labor market is of equal importance. Yet even this emphasis on skills and employability would soon be changing, giving way to the idea of pursuing “one’s passion.”

Carriages, Parachutes, and Other Means of Conveyance: Metaphors of Path, Sport, and War

We know what a job hunter is: someone whose life necessities have driven him or her into the labor market in pursuit of a wage or salary. But what is a “career changer”? Who is the other group of persons to whom Parachute is marketed? Webster’s Third New International Dictionary offers a definition of career as “a profession for which one undergoes special training and which is undertaken as a permanent calling; an occupation or profession engaged in as a lifework.” The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records the equestrian roots of the word. “Career” originates in the French word “carrière” for race course, the Spanish “carrera” for road, and “carraria” for carriage road. In its early usage, “career” was used to denote the ground on which a race is run, or the course over which any person or thing passes; a road, path, or way. It was also used to indicate the “short gallop of a horse at full speed, as in a tournament or battle.” Only in the early nineteenth century (1803) was the term used to indicate, in the OED’s words, “a person’s course or progress through life (or a distinct portion of life), esp. when publicly conspicuous, or abounding in remarkable incidents.” Thus “career” combines the idea of a journey or path with that of a game or sport, the tournament. The “career,” with its jousting for position, has its roots in the medieval tournament, a game that tested the battle skills of its men in short, fast, and violent runs. And, as the cultural historian Raymond Williams points out, the notion of career suggests being nearly out of control, linked as it is etymologically to “careen.” Career merges the notion of path with the idea of the race course, evoking not only speed but also sport or game. In short, the idea of career brings the metaphor of “a path in life” together with the idea of “life as a game.”

Bolles’s invocation of parachuting in his title links an image of skydiving with the notion of aerial disaster: the pilot’s escape or paratrooper’s descent. The title What Color Is Your Parachute? was, Bolles reported, a response to the expression “I’m bailing out of this job.” The book’s publisher, Phil Wood, noted that Bolles’s title, which conjures the image of the lone parachuter, complete with the narrow escape from the downed plane, the exhilaration of skydiving, the notion of an aerial view, and the promise of escape or safe landing, was key to the book’s success: “If this book had died, it would have been the title that killed it. Now that it lives, it’s the title that saved it.” Yet despite the reference to parachuting, the cover of What Color Is Your Parachute? never pictures a lone parachuter. Instead the image is a hybrid: part airborne balloon, part parachute silk. While the language of “parachuting” bridges both war and sport, the image of the balloon foregrounds pleasure and adventure. Bolles merges the idea of a sport or recreational pursuit with language that evokes the image of aerial battle and impending doom. Rather than following the linear paths of the earthbound carriage driver or cyclist, the parachuter/ballooner can take shortcuts and land in unexpected locales. The skydiver, paratrooper, or balloonist enjoys an aerial perspective, a God’s-eye view of the world, and sees the “roads less traveled” and earthbound paths as mere landmarks. The perils and promise inherent in the technology of flight, one of industrial capitalism’s most remarkable achievements, are evoked in Bolles’s title. The fact that the book found its home at the publisher of a bicycle repair manual seems somehow overdetermined: although the technology of cycling persists despite the prevalence of the automobile, bicycling continues, in the U.S. context, mostly as a sport or fitness pastime. In short, what was once an important means of transportation has become a recreational activity, much as the work that once filled vital needs (e.g., weaving and sewing, gardening, fishing and hunting) reappear as hobbies, as activities of leisure, as labors of love.

One’s Calling and Mission: Traditional Christianity in Bolles

Although Bolles evokes a powerful image of twentieth-century technological advances, the undercurrent of his rhetoric ensures continuity with the Puritan principle of finding and pursuing one’s “particular calling” only after one has pursued the “general calling”—only after one “knows God.” Consider this passage from the 1988 edition of Parachute:

Your first Mission here on Earth is one which you share with the rest of the human race, but it is no less your individual Mission for the fact that it is shared: and that it is, to seek out and find, in
daily—even hourly—communication, the One from whom your Mission is derived. The Missioner before the Mission, is the rule. In religious language, your Mission here is: to know God, and enjoy Him forever, and to see His hand in all His works.\textsuperscript{13}

No doubt the eighteenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony clergyman Cotton Mather would be pleased to see the influence of his 1710 pronouncement. Consider this passage from his Bonafacius or An Essay to Do Good:

Indeed, no Good Works can be done by any man until he be justified. Until a Man be United unto the Glorious CHRIST, who is our Life, he is a Dead Man. And, I Pray, what Good Works to be Expected from Such a Man? They will all be Dead Works.\textsuperscript{14}

As a skillful rhetorician, Bolles is aware of his audience and responsive to their limits. Indeed, his rhetoric with respect to “calling” and “mission” changes significantly across the years, varying with the tenor of the times. In the very earliest editions of Parachute, Bolles makes numerous theological references posed playfully or in passing, without any passages that are as directly theistic as those found in the 1988 edition. For example, the 1972 edition includes a board game, “Operation Parachute,” where the winning square is “The Full Career Job . . . Your Full Talents Fully Serving Man and God” (see fig. 4.2). The same year, and for many years thereafter, Bolles advocates the pursuit of a suitable calling in pious terms: “God’s world already has more than enough people who can’t wait for five o’clock to come so that they can now go and do what they want to do.”\textsuperscript{15} But by 1987, Bolles has made a subtle shift; “God’s world” disappears:

There is a vast world of work out there, where 111 million people are employed in this country alone—many of whom are bored out of their minds. All day long. Not for nothing is their motto TGIF—“Thank God It’s Friday.” They live for the weekends, when they can go do what they really want to do.\textsuperscript{16}

Subtle, perhaps inconsequential, and arguably an improvement in style, the shift to a more vernacular usage—from the pious “God’s world” to “TGIF”—is consistent with other changes in the book.

The indexes of the various editions of Parachute also offer some changes that suggest uncertainty about how to locate the book’s religious antecedents. While the term “calling” appears in the indexes of the 1972 and 1977 editions of Parachute, by 1982 the word vanishes. One could argue that the entire book is about finding one’s calling, thus indexing this concept would be impossible, but similar peculiarities of the indexing suggest that there was some concern about limiting the book’s religious references for its growing secular audience. On close examination, inconsistencies between the index and the book’s text emerge. While interpreting such errors is a risky business—perhaps overreaching—let’s consider just one. In 1982 edition of Parachute, the index includes, “talents, parable of the.”\textsuperscript{17} However, there is no actual discussion of the biblical parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) in the body of Bolles’s book. While the word “talent” is used (for example on page 142: “the more you enjoy what you are doing and where you are doing it, the better you are going to use the talents which God gave you”), no actual explanation or explication of the biblical parable of the talents appears in the text. Whoever prepared the index could have imagined the biblical association of the parable of the talents and included it in the index, despite the fact that there is no reference to the parable in the book’s text—or perhaps the parable had been included in the text and was subsequently deleted. Whatever led to the curious indexing error, by 1987 the anomaly had been eliminated, and references to “calling” had also vanished.

Throughout the 1970s and mid-1980s, Parachute became increasingly secularized, despite its genesis in a Protestant ministry. Then, in 1988, at a point when Christian fundamentalism had grown increasingly powerful in national political life, Bolles reemphasizes the Christian premises of his work with an appendix entitled “Religion and Job-Hunting: How to Find Your Mission in Life.” Bolles writes that he developed the new section after readers had requested it and claims that it was the most popular addition he’d made to the book in eighteen revisions over the previous twenty years’ time.\textsuperscript{18}

The mission appendix lays out Bolles’s own version of the Christian concept of mission in three parts, reminiscent of Cotton Mather’s 1701 sermon “A Christian at His Calling,” Parts 1 and 2 of Bolles’s version of one’s mission correspond to Mather’s “General Calling,” in that this mission is said to be shared by all. Everyone is required to “know God” and to “make the world a better place.” And the third aspect of Bolles’s version of mission corresponds closely with Mather’s idea of a “personal calling,” as the reader is asked:
(a) to exercise that Talent which you particularly came to Earth to use—your greatest gift, which you most delight to use,
(b) in the place(s) or setting(s) which God has caused to appeal to you the most,
(c) and for those purposes which God most needs to have done in the world.¹⁹

Bolles’s decision to reintroduce and emphasize the Christian content of Parachute during the height of Christian fundamentalism of the late 1980s offers an example of how responsive the advice literature is to cultural trends, yet it also demonstrates the persistence of the traditional idea of calling or mission across two centuries. The seemingly secular literatures of calling and vocation are grounded in longstanding Christian thinking regarding work as a reflection of God’s will.

From Livelihood to Identity: Downsizing and Depression

Despite the continuities with traditional Christian values, there were other subtle changes within the text of Parachute—and greater changes within the job search literature as a whole—as the recession of 1990 swept through the ranks of the employed in the form of the then newly minted term “downsizing.” Take, for example, the appearance of the topic “depression” in the index of the 1992 edition. Although Bolles discusses the emotional strain of job hunting using the term “rejection shock” throughout the series, it was not until 1992 that the word “depression” appeared in this context.²⁰ By 1996, the single-line index entry of “depression” had evolved into an entire chapter devoted to the topic and acquired thirteen subheadings, including “unemployment as cause.” While the appearance of depression in the index of Parachute may be as much a result of increased public awareness of mental illness and the wide availability of antidepressant medications, there is no doubt that the “downsizing” of the early 1990s—a term that makes it into the Parachute index in 1994²¹—contributed to depression in numerous individuals.

There was a time, the historian Karl Polanyi reminds us, when the “problem” of unemployment for the laborer was not so much a problem of lack of work as lack of wages.²² Today this reality is obscured: lack of work—unemployment—constitutes an acute psychological crisis. The loss of oc-
cupational identity has been socially constituted as at least as significant, if not more significant, than the loss of livelihood. Bolles offers an extensive series of common-sense coping strategies for the depressed job seeker, such as getting adequate sleep and exercise, eating well, and some mental exercises, including making a list of things that you enjoy and writing stories about your life.²³ Indeed, by 1996 Bolles has even downplayed the thought of death. Rather than asking readers to complete the sentence “Before I die I want to . . .” (as he had done in prior editions), Bolles’s 1996 edition of Parachute offers a less morbid approach to life planning. Under the heading “Your Biography As You Would Like It to Read, Someday,” Bolles proposes:

There are various way to approach this. Some people sit down and write what they would like their imaginary obituary to say, after they die. Other find this approach too morbid for words, so they like to pretend that they someday get into Who’s Who; and they write what they would like that entry to say about them. Others prefer to consider all their heroes or heroes, write what it is they like about them, and then circle those things which they would like to be true about themselves.²⁴

Parallel to this shift toward more uplifting language, consider the change in the conclusion of the chapter entitled “Where Do You Want to Use Your Skills?” In 1992, the chapter wrapped up with a metaphor of reciprocity:

Job-hunting is a two-way street. For the time being, whether the places you visit during your research happen to have a vacancy, or happen to want you, is premature and irrelevant. In this dance of life, you get first choice: you get to decide first of all whether or not you want them. Only after you have decided that you do want them, is it appropriate to ask if they also want you.²⁵

By 1996, the chapter concluded not with a metaphor of job hunting as a two-way street, but rather with an ode to the possibilities for individual fulfillment through the pursuit of one’s dreams:

It is amazing how often people do get their dreams, whether in stages or directly. The more you don’t cut the dream down, because of what you think you know about the real world, the more likely you are to find what you are looking for.
Most people don't find their heart's desire, because they decide to pursue just half their dream—and consequently they hunt for it with only half a heart.

If you want to pursue your whole dream, your best dream, the one you die to do, I guarantee you that you will hunt for it with all your heart. It is this passion which often is the difference between successful career-changers, and unsuccessful ones.26

In Bolles's more recent narratives of the job search, passion about what one does and effort in managing one's career path emerge as the central components of one's success. Getting a job is no longer sufficient, since today's job is tomorrow's pink slip. Although occupational satisfaction had always been central to Bolles's approach, the balance of the demands of the market (accommodating oneself to the market and "playing the game") and the desires of the job seeker (realizing one's "authentic path") has been tipped markedly toward the desires of the individual job seeker. And how could it be otherwise? When the market is utterly unpredictable, one can't plan on accommodating oneself to market demand. Instead, the emphasis is on individual pleasure, an idea that emerges full blown in another unexpected career advice bestseller, Marsha Sinetar's 1987 Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow.

New Age Advice to Job Seekers: Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow

In 1987 Paulist Press, a small publishing house in New Jersey whose primary books had been religious texts, published a title that would, like Parachute, become a surprise bestseller. Marsha Sinetar's book Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow sold so well that in 1989 the title was reissued by Dell.27 According to Publishers Weekly, the trade journal of the publishing industry, Sinetar's book rode the wave of unemployment and downsizing that swept the United States during the recession of 1990–92, with more than one million copies in print by 1995.28 Sinetar described the epiphany that provided her with the concept and title for her most successful book to date:

as I drove along beautiful Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, on a smogless, sunny California morning, a startling thought entered my head. It was as clear a thought as if someone was speaking to me: "Do what you love, the money will follow." At that very moment, I knew I had to, and would, take a leap of faith. I knew I had to, and would, step out, cut myself loose from all those things that seemed to bind me. I knew I would start doing what I most enjoyed: writing, working with industry (instead of public education) and living in the country instead of in the city.29

Her story is reminiscent of the New Testament description of the conversion of Paul, in transit, thrown from his horse by a great flash of light.30 Although Sinetar is clearly located in the Christian tradition of thinking of life as a spiritual journey, she takes pains to distance herself from the image of a joyless work ethic, offering her own vision as the corrective to the Puritan notion of work:

Perhaps [the idea that work is drudgery] evolved out of the Puritan ethic, which kept people's noses to the grindstone, grimly slaving away from sunrise till sunset. A respite was needed—not so much from the work, as from the attitudes behind the work, which were based on a deep antipathy to joy and playfulness. The Western concept of controlling nature, our love and fascination with “progress,” our admiration of material success and victory over obstacles have helped us equate work with those tasks and activities by which we shape and control external things: nature, time and the enemies of life—poverty, blight, a ferocious landscape, illness, the limitations of geographic distance and space. It would be natural to want to rest after channeling one's anger and anxieties toward work projects such as these. Viewed in this way, work becomes something cut off from the self, a survival vehicle and an avenue of activity that can make a person bitter, tired or cynical. Work then fragments and splits the personality, instead of integrating it.31

Along with a revisited and revised Protestant ethic, Sinetar evokes a hybridized—and not altogether accurate—version of the Buddhist concept of “right livelihood.” Rather than research and represent the Buddhist doctrine of right livelihood, Sinetar makes up her own definition and uses appeals to a natural order as her rhetorical strategy:

Right Livelihood is an idea about work which is linked to the natural order of things. It is doing our best at what we do best. . . . There is no way we can fail. Biology points out the logic of Right
Livelihood. Every species in the natural world has a place and function that is specifically suited to its capabilities. This is true for people too. Some of us are uniquely equipped for physical work, athletics, or dance; some of us have special intellectual gifts... some of us have aesthetic abilities... Examples are numerous of nature’s way of directing us to the path that will support us economically and emotionally; this is the path that we are meant to travel.32

Despite her shifting register—from species to individual—Sinetar’s examples, for the average reader, establish her claims within a natural order and within the comfortable time-worn metaphor of the path. Then, to establish some level of theological legitimacy for her use of the term, Sinetar hedges her bets about the authenticity of her use of the concept of “right livelihood,” noting that “the original concept of Right Livelihood apparently comes from the teachings of the Buddha, who described it as work consciously chosen, done with full awareness and care, and leading to enlightenment.”33

The Buddhist notion of right livelihood is a somewhat more nuanced concept, encouraging the seeker to make her or his living “only in ways that avoid deceit, treachery, trickery, and usury. Five occupations are specifically condemned: trading in arms, living beings, flesh, intoxicants, and poison.”34 Claude Whitmyer, who also promotes the ideal of right livelihood through his Center for Good Work, observes:

As the concept of right livelihood has been absorbed by twentieth century Western culture, its meaning has expanded beyond the Buddhist idea of doing no harm, to include the ideas that work should make a difference in the world, benefit the community, and be personally fulfilling.35

Although the Western use of the concept of right livelihood can be viewed as an expanded one—fused with the Protestant ethic—Sinetar limits her use of “right livelihood” to the idea that work be personally fulfilling and all but excludes the original precepts. Specifically, she advises readers that they ought to dispense with succumbing to societal demands and imperatives and seek to fulfill their inner dreams and ambitions. Like Bolles, Sinetar offers her readers self-assessment exercises in the form of questions: for example, “What makes me happy?... What memories fill me with joy?... Which of my traits or characteristics, when expressed, make me happy to be me?” to discover what their personal path might be.36 But, unlike Bolles, who suggests that job seekers adapt their skills to the demands of the labor market, Sinetar offers no advice on how to connect one’s inner ambitions with remunerative work. Instead, she advises that following one’s passion will always lead to a happy ending. And if it doesn’t, she offers a plan B, in the form of the dignity-of-all-labor doctrine.37 Blending the Buddhist idea of mindfulness with the humanistic psychology concept of self-actualization, Sinetar writes:

the actualizing person... sees work as a joyful exercise, a calling that is almost effortless. For him, work becomes a way in which to understand life around him, a resolver of paradoxes and a path for personal development. For him, work is a creative, graceful, present-moment experience. This is in line with the Buddhist perspective, which uses simple, daily routines as way to grow, as a way to maintain an elegant concentrated connection with the world, and as way to see the self as having a place in the scheme of things...

No matter how impersonal, dully or tedious the job might seem to others, for the individual whose work is like play, daily life is expressed as a lucky or blessed experience....

Any job—telephone operator, bank clerk, office administrator, librarian, carpenter, physician, auto mechanic, sales—is enlivened when performed by an actualizing adult. This individual, working at what he or she really enjoys—even when working at something unappealing on a short-term basis—has a different inward posture.38

And where Bolles offers advice on how to negotiate a salary and advises job hunters to consider the level of compensation that they need when evaluating where they’d like to work,39 Sinetar suggests that individuals cultivate “inner affluence”: in her words, “the quality of being that enriches us in all the really important, life-affirming ways.”40 In this model, financial compensation doesn’t just take a back seat to self-fulfillment; it has no seat at all. Work as worship supplants work as livelihood. The idea that one ought to work without any assurances of compensation—that one should wait hopefully “for the money to follow”—is consistent with an economy that is moving toward the artist as one of two models of the ideal worker.
The Artist's Way: Self-Subsidy and the Artist as the Exemplar for a Postindustrial Workforce

Artists continue to be among the most poorly compensated professionals and are often compelled to subsidize their own labor. No other occupational group is as renowned for pursuing their work irrespective of compensation. Self-subsidy is a foregone conclusion for most working artists. A 1997 report entitled "Creative America," prepared by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, describes the economic hurdles that American artists encounter:

A good case can be made that our cultural life is underwritten by the undercompensated labor of artists and scholars. Despite the highly publicized—and deeply misleading—examples of musicians, opera singers, or authors who earn millions of dollars, the average working artist usually finds only intermittent work and must often supplement his or her profession with a second job.

An extensive survey of 12,000 craft artists, actors and painters found that the vast majority earned less than $20,000 per year from their work. Only 28% of Actors Equity members sampled in the survey made more than $20,000 per year. Over 90% of the painters earned less than $20,000 and nearly three-fourths made only $7,000 or less a year from sales of their work. Uncompensated or undercompensated labor makes the arts, as we know them in the U.S. context, possible. Although some cultural critics have even argued that art work can only be produced when shielded from the demands of the marketplace, operating in a sequestered "gift economy," such an approach begs the question of how artists are to continue subsidizing and sequestering their work when fewer and fewer jobs offer the possibility of adequate compensation to pursue such a dual path.

It was within this context, and in the midst of the height of the recovery movement, that the self-described recovering alcoholic Julia Cameron created and self-published The Artist's Way, Subtitled A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity and superstitied A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self, the book was subsequently published in 1992 by Putnam Jeremy Tarcher as a $12.95 trade paperback. According to the book's publisher, sales to date are in excess of 1.5 million copies and multiple sequels include The Vein of Gold (1996) and The Artist's Way at Work (1998).

To understand the magnitude of Cameron's sales, compare its success with that of M. Scott Peck's Road Less Traveled. Recall that Peck's book, which enjoyed a record-breaking 694 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list and was marketed to the widest possible readership as a generic self-help book, is reported to have sold between 6 and 7 million copies. Cameron's roadmap, on the other hand, never appeared on the New York Times bestseller list and was targeted to a significantly smaller segment of the self-help market in the "creativity" subgenre of the literature. When these facts are considered, Cameron's sales are record-breaking in their own right.

The Artist's Way relies on techniques designed to cultivate an "authentic self": chief among them the "morning pages" and the "artist's date." The former is the practice of writing three pages in longhand immediately after waking up in the morning every day. This writing is not to be thought of as writing, but rather as a kind of fodder for creative production and a place for uncensored reflection. "Morning pages," writes Cameron, "are a meditation, a practice that bring[s] you to your creative and to your creator God." The second tool or technique, the "artist's date," is defined as a block of time, perhaps two hours weekly, especially set aside and committed to nurturing your creative consciousness, your inner artist ... an excursion, a play date that you preplan and defend against all interlopers. You do not take anyone on this artist date but you and your inner artist, a.k.a. your creative child.

The daily routine of the morning pages recalls the daily prayer of religious practices, while the weekly two-hour "artist's date" mirrors the time structures typically allotted for religious services. Artists are also instructed to create "an artist's altar" and to devise rituals to "become spiritually centered." Creativity, like sobriety, is conceived of as a natural state that has been disrupted by the civilizing process. A God or Higher Power, in this case often appropriately enough referred to as a "creator," is assumed to guide one's creative recovery. And one is to attend or care for one's "inner artist" or "creative child." In every aspect of its language, The Artist's Way reflects the formulations that were popularized by the literature of the recovery movement: "recovering" one's "inner child" is revamped as "discovering" one's "creative child" or "inner artist."
Journalistic accounts of the success of _The Artist’s Way_ report that creativity self-help programs based on the book have been offered by corporate human relations departments, university extension programs, and in a host of holistic health and therapeutic contexts, as well as in less formal groups of friends and colleagues. Some claim that millions of individuals have met in _Artist’s Way_ support groups. In addition, numerous online discussion groups have been predicated on principles from _The Artist’s Way_.

In 1998 Cameron and collaborator Mark Bryan tapped into the career self-help market with _The Artist’s Way at Work_. The first line of the book focuses on the central premise and the shift in the workplace: “Intellectual capital—ideas as money, money as ideas—is today the real currency of the business world.” Indeed, the new book adapted their techniques for fostering creativity as a means to spiritual fulfillment for the workplace and crystallized a trend that had been developing in the culture: the idea of the artist as an exemplar for the postindustrial worker.

The evidence of this phenomenon-in-the-making had been mounting. A 1992 career advice book by Laurence G. Boldt called _Zen and the Art of Making a Living_ expressly argued that shaping one’s work life ought to be conceived of as art. Meanwhile, corporate workers were being urged to be more creative, arthful, and poetic. In the mid-1990s, the performance artist Martha Wilson, who had founded Franklin Furnace, a New York City alternative artists’ space, began offering creativity workshops to corporate clients. Similarly, the poet David Whyte, who had published a book entitled _The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America_, had begun providing poetry workshops for discouraged and disheartened corporate workers who had survived the winnowing of the workforces in their offices only to be saddled with handling the work of their former colleagues. Around the same time, a cartoon appeared in the _New Yorker_ that suggested the parallels between the lifestyles of artists and those of the postindustrial labor force (see fig. 4.3).

In the mid-1990s, the artistic mentalité provided an ideal vehicle for motivating a demoralized, downsized, and otherwise dissatisfied labor force. And artists provided the ideal work model for this new postindustrial labor force, as they:

- Are trained to work with symbolic forms, so they offer an ideal model for the newly christened “knowledge workers.”

Figure 4.3. _New Yorker_ cartoon by Edward Sorel published April 24, 1995. © The New Yorker Collection 1995 Edward Sorel from cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.

- Have been engaged in a pursuit of excellence for its own sake well in advance of Tom Peters’s 1982 “search”
- Are accustomed to working without supervision
- Find ways of motivating themselves even in the absence of compensation
- Typically work out of their own workspace, thus shifting costs of overhead (space, office equipment, software, etc.) to the worker (and thereby reducing fixed capital costs for corporations)
- Blur the distinction between work and pleasure. This ensures that workers who think like artists won’t be watching the clock or looking for overtime

Finally, last and best of all:

- They work for free. Artists notoriously engage in their creative work for little, or even no, financial compensation.
What finer characteristics could a system like capitalism seek in a worker? The cultural critic Andrew Ross points out that this new model of artists/workers—unlike Marx’s “industrial reserve army” of the unemployed, always available to keep the cost of labor low—creates a reserve volunteer army of people who will work for fun. Here, Ross asserts, we have not just a low-wage reserve industrial labor force, but a no-wage labor force.

The Romantic myth of the artist toiling over his work alone in his garret—sequestered from the demands and rewards of the marketplace and foregoing the pleasures and demands of childrearing—has, to some extent, persisted through the twentieth century. This ethos, which encourages the pursuit of one’s work out of love of the work or craft without sulling oneself with concerns about marketplace viability, and without exhausting oneself with the demands of childrearing, provides an ideal rationale for encouraging labor without compensation.

In 1956 the sociologist William H. Whyte aptly described “the organization man,” whose characteristics—conformity, limited initiative, and a loathing of genius or excellence—were best suited to work in a hierarchical corporate context. The energetic entrepreneurial spirit of the Protestant ethic was in decline, Whyte asserted, as group solidarity and company loyalty were increasingly critical for individual advancement. But with the so-called reengineering of corporations in the 1980s, “the search for excellence,” and the rise of knowledge-based industries, work styles and human resource management models have necessarily adapted, and a new form of the Protestant ethic emerges where individual work satisfaction substitutes for “grace.”

The quest for occupational satisfaction is an understandable, individual attempt to solve the problems of alienation, boredom, and rage in hierarchical work settings. But because the problem is framed as an individual problem, any solution is necessarily partial, contingent, and temporary. As long as the satisfaction of human needs is subject to a social division of labor with inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and organized to privilege profit-taking over meeting human needs, any version of occupational satisfaction is double-edged, with the desire for vocational happiness serving as a powerful means of social control.

One of the central lessons of Weber’s Protestant ethic thesis is that when it comes to social action, intentions are not what matters. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritans did not set out to create the conditions for the development of industrial capitalism; they merely attempted to find a solution to the devastating psychological implications of the doctrine of predestination. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists have not set out to provide the ideal model for the postindustrial worker; they have simply attempted to find some means to happiness in their work—some way to avoid the stifling alienation borne of the industrialized division of labor and the conformist requirements of corporate cultures. But one unintended consequence of these choices is the development of an ideal of work as the central, even sole, source of self-fulfillment.

The ideal that everyone ought to work purely for the intrinsic rewards of his or her work—for his or her own amusement and delight—would be an appealing notion if only the extrinsic necessities of life were assured. Even Abraham Maslow had called for the satisfaction of primary physiological, emotional, and social needs before the satisfaction of “higher needs,” such as his ideal of self-actualization, would be possible. Thus this move toward separating work from compensation could be a radically progressive one, were it coupled with a call for a new definition of rights in terms of human needs. Rather than a “right to work,” one would speak of a right to all the basic necessities of life: food and shelter, healthcare and retirement benefits, access to education, and an environment protected from wanton pollution. These material rights would serve not as a means of re-creating oneself as labor power but as a means of realizing oneself and enjoying one’s life, which is, after all, the ostensible goal of all of this self-improvement literature. In the absence of this possibility, the primary way individuals seem to imagine achieving any measure of safety and security is by identifying with capital—by imagining themselves as entrepreneurs, as the “CEOs of Me, Inc.”.

Tom Peters: From Managing the Self-Actualizing Worker to the CEO of Me, Inc.

Motivating workers in a climate of decreased compensation levels and heightened insecurity about employment poses a particular challenge for managers. By the early 1980s, U.S. unemployment rates had reached nearly their highest point since the depression of the 1930s, with official unemployment figures showing 9.6 percent of the population out of work, and nearly 20 percent of the African-American population unemployed. At the same time, median real wages had dropped to the lowest point since 1970. It was into this setting that Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., introduced the concept that would be used, in lieu of wage increases.
and job security, to motivate an increasingly anxious and demoralized workforce. “Excellence” became the watchword of the 1980s, and occupational satisfaction in the pursuit of this abstraction was offered as employee motivation. The title of Peters and Waterman’s book, *In Search of Excellence*, became the management mantra of the 1980s, and managers were advised to offer employees greater control over their work and increased input into decision-making. Such management strategies, imported from the quality circles of Japanese corporations, offered a sense of engagement and participation when the traditional rewards of job security, salary increases, and promotions were unlikely. Indeed, by 1987, Peters (who was now writing under the friendlier, less academic “Tom” rather than “Thomas”) is offering a seven-point strategy for enhancing business performance, drawn in large measure from Japanese management principles:

1. “Kaizen, the never-ending quest for perfection”; 2. “the development of full human potential”; 3. “Jidoka, the pursuit of superior quality”; 4. “build mutual trust”; 5. “develop team performance”; 6. “every employee as manager”; and 7. “provide a stable livelihood for all employees.” These seven features, supported by simple systems, extensive training, and a host of other devices, have resulted in startling performance improvement in short order.61

Second only to “the never-ending pursuit of perfection,” the development of human potential is seen as pivotal for developing productivity, as Peters asks managers to examine their own beliefs: “Do you genuinely believe that there are no limits to what the average person can accomplish, if well trained, well supported, and well paid for performance? Such a belief is the #1 spur to achievement.”62

Along with training, support, and adequate compensation, Peters asserts that maintaining an effective workforce requires some measure of job security: “only some guarantee of security will enable firms to induce employees to (1) constantly take risks (improve things, add new skills) and (2) be flexible enough to deal with constant change.”63 To maintain this ideal workforce, which is well paid (at least in Peters’s estimation) and enjoys a secure livelihood, Peters advocates that managers “develop a plan for using temporaries, subcontractors, and overtime in conjunction with staffing at 85 to 90 percent of normal demand requirements.”64 In exchange for this putative security, employees are asked to “accept inconveniences, such as mandatory overtime,” and “agree to perform tasks outside their normal job definition.”65

The trouble with Peters’s formulations is that the increased use of temps and subcontractors to ensure the job security of regular workers creates the ever present specter of unemployment, poor compensation, and lack of benefits among as many as seven out of every fifty workers (simply using his recommended percentage of maintaining permanent staffing at 85 to 90 percent of normal demand).65 Peters advocates the elimination of all middle management and invokes the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company, where he had been employed when writing *In Search of Excellence*. “The first step in accomplishing successful plant floor implementation of new manufacturing approaches is the clearing out of all the middle managers and support service layers that clog the wheels of change.”66 Peters continues with his reflections on what came to be called “reengineering”:

What do we do, as a firm or nation, with the huge excess of middle managers? There’s no easy answer here either. Many can be devolved to the field, but many will not survive the transition. Extensive retraining is a minimum . . . . But a whole generation who did their jobs well and a new generation of women and minorities finally making it into management’s lower and middle ranks have been cast adrift . . . . [A]djustment assistance . . . is needed as a matter of policy; but most proposals, mine and others’, still don’t deal adequately with the immensity of this problem. . . . Demotions back to nonsupervisory status seldom work out.68

Although Peters recognizes the need for job security as a prerequisite for a motivated and flexible workforce, he asserts that to remain competitive, businesses must cut their costs by eliminating employees. The contradiction between management’s need for a secure (and therefore) productive workforce is confounded by the conflicting need to cut staffing. How to maintain a secure yet expendable workforce becomes an intractable management problem.

What is required, then, is some means of making employees feel secure even when they know they’re not. One solution to this is to place the onus of employment security on the individual worker by making each and every worker responsible for his or her own “career.” If the idea of “Kaizen,” or the constant quest for perfection, is transferred from the product to the worker, then the responsibility of maintaining financial security is shifted to the worker. Work on the self becomes an integral part of the worker’s new work, as I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter.
Although Peters began his career writing management books—that is, self-help books for organizations—the 1994 publication of *The Pursuit of Wow* marked a shift in his focus and target audience: he moved from advising organizations to advising individual entrepreneurs. Case studies in *Wow* focus not on corporate successes or failures but on individual successes, sometimes noting an organization that the individual founded or leads. Peters suggests that he is attempting to provide viable solutions for “the immensity of the problem” of unemployed managers that he identified in his 1987 *Thriving on Chaos*. In August 1997, Peters published an article—“The Brand Called You”—that summed up his recommendations for individuals:

> It’s time for me—and you—to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that’s true for anyone who’s interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work.

Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.

Start right now: as of this moment you’re going to think of yourself differently! You’re not an “employee” of General Motors, you’re not a “staffer” at General Mills, you’re not a “worker” at General Electric or a “human resource” at General Dynamics (ooops, it’s gone!). Forget the Generals! You don’t “belong to” any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn’t to any particular “function.” You’re not defined by your job title and you’re not confined by your job description.

Starting today you are a brand.69

Specifically, Peters now advises individuals to market themselves using a variety of techniques for fostering word of mouth, each of which involves additional work for the new CEO of Me, Inc.:

> Try moonlighting! Sign up for an extra project inside your organization, just to introduce yourself to new colleagues and showcase your skills—or work on new ones. Or, if you can carve out the time, take on a freelance project that gets you in touch with a totally novel group of people. If you can get them singing your praises, they’ll help spread the word about what a remarkable contributor you are. . . .

[Try teaching a class at a community college, in an adult education program, or in your own company. You get credit for being an expert, you increase your standing as a professional, and you increase the likelihood that people will come back to you with more requests and more opportunities to stand out from the crowd. . . .

If you’re a better writer than you are a teacher, try contributing a column or an opinion piece to your local newspaper.

. . . And if you’re a better talker than you are teacher or writer, try to get yourself on a panel discussion at a conference or sign up to make a presentation at a workshop.70

In 1999, Peters consolidated his observations about how to transform oneself into the CEO of Me, Inc., with the publication of *The Brand You Fifty*, subtitled *Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself from an “Employee” into a Brand That Shows Distinction, Commitment, and Passion!*

Peters’s advice wouldn’t seem all that new to any reader of Helen Gurley Brown, who nearly two decades earlier offered a similar success strategy. In a section of *Having It All* called “Always Be Working Out,” Brown advocates continuous work.71 Although Brown puns on the expression for working on one’s physique, what she’s actually advising is precisely what Peters suggests: work without compensation. She writes: “Although I’ve suggested you do just about anything that keeps your motor tuned, work-oriented or not, the working out is best applied to your job, and gradually you will begin to undertake little projects that contribute to it.”72 Brown goes on to share some examples of her “little projects”—providing free ad copy to a beauty salon and developing and implementing a direct mail marketing campaign for a weight reduction salon. Brown reports that the beneficiaries of the direct mail campaign “never really thanked me, not even with a free ride on one of their motorized couches,” but the hair salon came through for her, with a single free hairdo.73 Brown concludes: “My advice is to volunteer like crazy and also turn in work that nobody asked for—but make it easy and comfortable for your boss to ignore that extra work or say No to your requests. Don’t be irritating.”74 Let’s say that again: “Make it easy for your boss to ignore that extra work.” The road to success, for Brown and for Peters, is paved with uncompensated labor. Perhaps because women have long been
acquainted to working for free, putting in hours of unwaged labor in the home, the thought of working for free was not altogether alien. Women got to the idea of working for free sooner since they've been doing it all along. Transferring that unwaged work to the workplace at least offered some opportunity for advancement, or a free haircut. Unfortunately for those women who were also mothers (as well as for their partners committed to coparenting), saying yes to that extra project at the office, teaching that uncompensated course at the local college as a way of promoting one's business, or working on that self-promotional project would be likely to lead to child neglect, additional childcare costs, or both. While the "family man" was once the standard of the reliable employee (as he was assisted by the labors of a homemaking spouse yet held captive to his employer by the raw vulnerability of his dependents' needs), the situation had changed. Parents were caught between the demand that they devote all of their time to the demands of their careers—using all their evenings, weekends, and vacations to catch up on work projects or seek out new employment opportunities—and the demand of caring for their families. The CEO of Me, the lone artist and the singular entrepreneur, signaled a new model for the ideal worker free of the baggage of dependents.

Artist and Entrepreneur: Redoubling the Metaphors

While the artist-worker is expected to work without compensation purely for love of his or her work, the entrepreneur is expected to work on spec, for possible rewards to be reaped down the line. The artist and the entrepreneur differ in their motivation—the former operates from an intrinsic motivation while the latter operates from an announced profit motive—but both work without any immediate sign of compensation. Ironically, the desire for unalienated labor, for engagement in one's work, results in giving away the store (the artist's way) or working countless hours of overtime in order to "brand" and "market" one's self. What were once discrete categories—artist and entrepreneur—have collapsed, even as the artist has been enrolled as an exemplar for the labor force. If Benjamin Franklin was "an avant-garde of one" for the eighteenth century, Andy Warhol serves something of the same role for the late twentieth century:

"I like to think of myself as an artist, and money is the medium in which I work best."
entrepreneurs and artists, as artist-entrepreneurs, are ideally suited to the new forms of capitalism. While work for free and work on spec under the appealing banner of unalienated labor is a central feature of the new ideal in the labor market, in the next chapter I'll show how work on the self—investing in one's own human capital—becomes a central preoccupation. Although the self-help literature of occupational satisfaction idealizes engaged and unalienated labor, work on the self, which arguably can only be an alienated form of labor, is required to maintain employability. Next I want to explore the various ways that readers of self-improvement literature are urged to work on themselves. Behind the happy and engaged image of the resourceful and self-sufficient artist-entrepreneur is the shadow—some might say Janus-face—of this new figure: a beleaguered and belabored self.