

"Lessons in Life-Shifting"

The Portfolio Life



Do you remember how life played out when we were kids? Most days were made up of a little of this and a little of that: a little time at school, a little time at play, a little time with mom/dad and maybe siblings, a little homework or TV, and lots of sleep. Even at school as a child, the day was chopped up into a series of multiple adventures: arts and music, math and science, reading and maybe physical education or sports. There was no one activity that predominated: we lived what I have come to call, a “portfolio life”.

So what happens to this plethora of activities when we become adults? All of a sudden, as the bells toll for adolescence, we begin to get asked THE question: so what do you want to do when you grow up? What do you plan to do after school? And of course, the adults who pin us down with these questions only want ONE answer. They want to know what career, what vocation, and most likely, what JOB we plan to attach ourselves to after graduation. Yet there is the rub.

After many years of cultural conditioning in which we are encouraged and expected to live a portfolio life—grazing our way through a banquet of diverse activities—all of a sudden we are expected to just choose one! No wonder many adolescents get depressed or rebel against their parents and teachers as the end of childhood draws nigh. Could it be more than just raging hormones and lack of proper preparation that causes so many to recoil at the thought of “getting a job”, or choosing a “career”? Perhaps the problem is deeper, more pervasive and truly oppressive: being forced to *downsize your self and choose to do one thing* for the rest of your life? Yikes.

Many years later, usually in their mid-thirties (and sometimes not until much later), clients show up in my office exhausted, depressed and worn down by life. By the singular

life that is. And I don't mean the "single" life (in fact more likely it will be the "singular" nature of married life...but that's another topic). In this case, I mean the single job, the one-stop career, the monochrome vocation. The core issue, to my mind, is the much touted theory that underpins the American way: the idea that happiness will result from choosing to do a *single job* within a *single company* with a *singular focus* on making the *singular thing* that matters: money.

When people come to me depressed and angry and lost, the first thing I encourage them to seek out is variety, diversity, and multiplicity in everything they do...especially in their job! In Jungian terms, the wall of depression that many people hit with regard to their careers is a direct result of a perfectly normal activity taking place in the unconscious psyche: individuation. Individuation is a fancy term for a fairly simple and straightforward theory of Jung's: each person has within them the spark of a divine core, a deeply profound and unique "Self" that seeks to be made manifest in the world. Individuating is nothing more than the process of becoming fully human, living out our true and fullest potential in the world. The concept is simple but within the narrow confines of our cultural boundaries, becoming fully whole and "individuated" is difficult and challenging at best.

Consider the analogy: just as a rose bush "individuates" by producing spectacularly radiant and diverse blooms of color, so too the human being is designed to "bloom" through the expression of a vast array of talents and gifts. Deep down don't we all dream of singing, painting, writing, making films, acting in them, building cathedrals, designing cities, running a marathon and so on? It's all in us: we are designed to be portfolio people, not job rats. No wonder we get depressed when the new cars and the new clothes and the fatty delicious foods just don't fit the bill of happiness. Something else is at work.

The good news is that more and more of us are rebelling against the one-job one-life theory of happiness. We are coming to accept that very few of us will have just one career in our lifetime anymore. The days of the "company man" are behind us—and thank god for that. Yet, the trouble remains: we are still expected and usually expect ourselves to find that one Holy Grail vocation that will take away all our suffering and satisfy all our dreams.

Well, here is the rub: it isn't going to happen. Just as Jung describes the individuated Self as a multiplicity of forms and expressions and desires and capabilities all pushing to be made manifest—to move from unconscious fantasy into conscious reality—we will NEVER be entirely happy settling into one job. And that is how it should be. True satisfaction requires us to circle back to our carefree childhood approach to life: to live out the rainbow of possibilities, to create a portfolio life.

If you would like to break free from the chains of the "job" and start living a portfolio life, here are some steps to consider:

1. Begin in the realm of fantasy. Allow yourself to dream more. No matter what your current situation—one job, no job, too many jobs—any major LIFE SHIFT begins with

an idea, a possibility, a vision.

2. Dream of the ideal day. Give yourself time to daydream about all the possibilities—what do you love to do? What did you do as a child that you thought you could do forever?

3. Seek out diversity in the here and now. Take a close look at your current “job” or situation. What is the range of variety in the work? Are there ways you could diversify your portfolio of activities even within the current job?

4. Learn something new. The key to the childhood portfolio was learning. At a certain point, every thing you’ve ever learned to do was NEW. Be willing to be a beginner. Choose something, anything that you have never done before and do it.

5. Re-frame the boundaries between work and play. Begin to loosen your definitions: where does your job begin and end? How do you define the distinction? Is it time-bound (e.g. Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm)?, Is it money-bound (e.g. job pays, non-job doesn’t)? Reflect on the artificial nature of these boundaries and consider how they could be made more permeable.

6. Seek out playmates. Whenever we are considering making a change in our job or life situation, it only becomes harder and more challenging if we try to do it alone. Conduct a health check of your social/family circles: are these people supportive of you and your life? Will they support a change? If not, they might need to be part of the change you seek.

7. Expand your notion of time. We get locked into our artificial definitions of work time versus family time versus playtime and at a certain point these mental attachments to time can actually reinforce our lethargy and depression. Don’t let weekdays, or 9am-5pm, or nighttime or weekends become attached to any particular activity: break it up. Take a weekday off and play with your kids. Work all day on a Saturday at something you care about. Break down the barriers of time-based habits. The culture—and your boss or spouse—may not help here. Seek out support and input from those who will. The more flexible you are with time the more likely you will be to be able to incorporate a portfolio lifestyle into your world as you get ready to make major change.

8. Do your financial homework. Know your budget. Know what you really need to support yourself and your family. Consider what material affects you could do without. Know your values. Money is an emotional symbol of wellness. It is as much about quality of life as quantity. Consider living with less stuff and more time.

9. Put in place a holistic fitness plan. Ask yourself: what is my daily regimen of self-care? How do I care for my emotional body? How do I take care of the physical body? What am I seeking out to stimulate the mental body? What is my spiritual path? The first portfolio that you should have in place for your new portfolio life is regular regimen of activities that nurture your self—body and soul. Through these activities my clients often find their way to their next “job”.

10. Quit your job. Ok. This is the big step. But keep in mind quitting your job may not be the solution for you. The key to a portfolio life is diversity, variety, and vitality, not whether you have a job or not. It may be possible for you to create all of these within the framework of your current employment, but you may have to re-invigorate the work, re-frame the structure of activities, or expand the enterprise. On the other hand, you may just have to move on. If you have systematically taken on steps 1-9, and have put a good

support system in place, you should be ready. Take the plunge. Step off the edge, and you will soar. I promise.