

HELPING PEOPLE TO DO FREEDOM:

REFLECTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS OF AN OCCASIONAL CAREER COUNSELLOR



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It began as friendship. I said: I like personal success books. She said: how does that stuff apply to me? I did my best, in a conversation that must have lasted about two hours, and apparently it helped. Friends of that friend, and friends of those friends, also gave it a go. Word-of-mouth has kept the customers coming ever since, in a steady trickle.

I'm not like a careers master at school. I don't know that much about CVs or about how to do job interviews. I try to get people to discover what makes them tick and what they truly want, and what ideas might be inside their heads which are stopping them from doing what they want.

I usually charge my customers something, if only to clarify that we are discussing their careers and not just chatting at random. I don't try to make big money by counselling, because that would take away the amateurism of it which now makes it feel comfortable. My usual payment is £20 and most are happy with that, although I've done some sessions for nothing. (People with career crises are sometimes very short of cash.) For the rest, £20 is a small enough sum for them not to have to believe that they got good advice if they feel they didn't. They're paying me to try, not for any guarantee that I'll succeed. To make a serious living at counselling I'd need to charge nearer £50 per session, and to justify a fee like that I'd have to have qualifications and be an expert. At which point I might start apologising for my homespun wisdoms and be tempted to wrap them up as objective knowledge. Maybe I should try to move up in the world, and sell my services to people for whom £200 is small change. Perhaps this piece will shift my counselling career in that direction.

"COUNSELLING MUST BE NON-DIRECTIVE"

Some counsellors don't believe in actual counselling, that is, in offering advice. But offering advice and forcing advice down someone's throat are surely distinguishable. Often my customers need to decide their next step quickly, and they genuinely want some suggestions from outside their regular circle of friends or familiar thought processes. Advocacy can distort judgement, but it can also aid it, especially if it is offered in a way that makes plain its fallibility. Advice, even if gone against, makes for better deci-

sions, because it provokes the discussion of further unconsidered alternatives. My advice is only that, my advice. It isn't "professional". It's not science. It's just how I see things. I've lived a bit, done some things well, done other things badly. And, I've read books, such as how-to-be-successful books, and such as biographies — which tell of how famously successful people have got into lots of the same career muddles as the rest of us. The only training I've done was a short local authority course run by a man who directed us, as eloquently as his disbelief in being eloquent allowed, that counselling must be non-directive.

The non-directiveness people do have a point. I recall directing a play at university and being amazed at how different it looked to me as I sat among the first night audience to how it had looked in rehearsal. Actors who had shone in rehearsal were upstaged by others who had seemed ordinary. Jokes fell flat, while other lines which we didn't even realise were jokes brought the house down. The point being that talking about your ambitions and problems with a counsellor — who is another sort of audience — can transform the way you then see them, and the counsellor need not say anything for this to be so.

FIND OUT WHAT THEY WANT TO DO AND TELL THEM TO DO IT

I prefer a mixture of directiveness and non-directiveness. Most of us can remember being thanked for advice which we hardly gave. Here's how that can work.

COUNSELLOR: So. What's your dilemma? Why do you think that talking through your career choices with me might help?

RECEIVER OF COUNSELLING: Well, I'm torn between becoming a Licensed Confuffulator, which is what my parents want, and being a wadgellist, which is not as well paid but which would be far more fun if I could make a go of it.

C (slowly and thoughtfully): I see.

ROC: Yes, being a confuffulator does make a lot of sense, and I'd certainly be better able to support a family ...

C: ... and having a family is important? ...

ROC: Yes, eventually. And provided that I can supply my family with quecks and digdogs and so forth.

C: I see. But you'd prefer to be a wadgellist?

ROC: Exactly! It's great to be understood so clearly. So few of my friends seem to get that. They just go on about how confuffling would be more secure.

C: Would it?

ROC: Probably. I guess.

C: But maybe, if you became a confuffulator, you'd not be able to concentrate because at the back of your mind would always be the thought of how much more fun you might be having if you were wadgelling instead?

ROC: Yes that's true! I would probably hate it.

C: Are there failed confuffulators who don't earn much?

ROC: Lots.

C: So becoming a confuffulator wouldn't guarantee lots of quecks and digdogs?

ROC: No.

C: However, you're worried that being a wadgellist might also not provide quecks or digdogs. Is there any way you could be a well-paid wadgellist. Are there many rich wadgellists?

ROC: Quite a few, but it's a very competitive field.

C: What do the rich wadgellists do that the others don't?

ROC: That's an interesting way of looking at it. Wow! Hm.

C: You wouldn't perhaps feel that becoming a rich wadgellist would mean that you'd sold out?

ROC: Definitely not! I'd love to be a rich wadgellist!

C: What's stopping you?

ROC: Well for starters I don't have any pluggles.

C: How could you get some pluggles?

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

ROC: I suppose I could ... er ... do a bit of jippering.

C: Jippering. Hm. Are you good at that? Does it pay well?

ROC: Yes. I wouldn't want to spend my life doing it, though.

C: How much jippering would you have to do to afford some pluggles?

ROC: Well, let me see. Er ... about a year, maybe two.

C: Would that be a problem?

ROC: No, not really.

C: Right. Here's my first preliminary suggestion, which could be all wrong but ...

ROC: Yes, yes, what are you saying?

C: Do some jippering. Buy some pluggles, and become a wadgellist. Try to be a rich wadgellist. If your parents object, tell them that this is what will make you most happy.

ROC: Wow. Yes. That's brilliant! How do you do it?

Okay, I've played this scene for laughs. But I don't need to know about confuffulating, wadgelling and the rest of them to offer worthwhile advice, and I believe there are some crude yet eerily effective computer programs which prove this. Simply: find out what the customer wants to do and tell him to do it. I want to do A, he says. So why not, I reply, do A? I can't because of B. How could you deal with B? Well, I could do C. So do C. Yes, but for that I need D. What could you do to get D? E. So: do E, get some D, use it to do C thereby dealing with B thus enabling you to do A. Gosh, Brian, you're a genius. But all I've done is lay out the logic of what is being said, unconfused by any knowledge of the details.

The mere thought that my customer might be able to spend the rest of his working life doing what he would most enjoy often releases a surge of pleasurable energy, such as he had before been unable to find or had thought himself too old for. I try to make my counselling customers happy and I often do, sometimes dramatically.

I do suggest things that my customer might do, but he tells me what he wants to do before I bounce that back at him. I don't insert outside judgements (your parents are right about confuffulating, which is better than wadgelling — digdogs don't matter — jippering is beneath you). His circumstances as he sees them are my starting point, rather than any irrelevances about what I might want to do, were I facing such choices, with my tastes, my preferences and my values.

NO OBVIOUS RAILS

Many people — young people especially — are not in the habit of thinking logically about their own career choices, because they have not been in the habit of freely making such choices. Others, such as parents, have mapped out their futures for them and put rails in front of them.

Riding along on rails supplied by others is not a crime, but it becomes a problem if someone or something rips up the rails. You fail some vital exams. You get the sack. Your whole patch of the economy goes into decline, or suddenly gets more competitive. You have a "mid life crisis". Your plan to become the Grand Panjandrum of the British Federation of Confuffulators fails, and merely being part of a brand-X confuffulation partnership no longer appeals. What do you do now? No obvious plan presents itself. You have no obvious rails to proceed along.

Maybe you're on rails of your own making (you're a wadgellist!), but for reasons you can't pin down, or which don't seem "reasonable", travelling along them has lost the magic that it once had.

You're used to being logical about other things. What's two plus two? What caused the Napoleonic Wars? How can we expand the wadgelling market, and capture more of it? How can wadgelling be computerised and put on the internet? But you may not be used to applying such thinking to your own life.

SELF-HELP

Worse, you may have been persuaded that it is *wrong* to think logically about your own career anxieties. This is "selfish". You

have "responsibilities". You must think only of what you "must" do, how you must deal with "real life" rather than "fantasy", and so on. Counselling, then, can get results simply by "allowing" people who are used to thinking logically about other things to do the same for themselves.

Women can be especially afflicted by the notion that thinking logically about their career worries is "selfish". And a typical male mistake is to think that being uncertain about how to live your life means that you are weak and unmanly. Real men aren't confused! Real men just do it! But there is nothing either wrong or weak in thinking about how to live as you want. Doing as much self-help as you can is, I would say, more of a moral obligation than an immoral indulgence. Look after yourself and you won't be expecting or begging others to look after you, and you'll be better at looking after them if they need it. People who look after themselves tend to be those who have thought about how to do it.

THE LINE BETWEEN THE MORALLY NEUTRAL AND THE MORALLY WRONG

The assumption that self-help is wrong is a particular example of a general tendency which I encounter in many of my customers.

Maybe, one day, someone will ask for my advice about whether to keep their present honest but unexciting job, or to take up the offer they've recently had to become a criminal. I guess I live a sheltered life with only law-abiding friends and acquaintances because so far this hasn't happened. No, the "moral" problem my customers have is not that they reject or ignore morality, but that they often reject or ignore morally unobjectionable career options, for reasons that they speak of *as if* they were moral reasons. It's "wrong", they imply, to go against the wishes of one's parents, or to follow the wishes of one's parents, to work part-time instead of full-time, full-time instead of part-time, to want to get rich, or not to want to get rich. I recall one man who felt ashamed of the fact that he wanted to get rich *so that he could look after his father*. But ashamed is how you should feel about murdering or assaulting or robbing people. There's no corner of Hell labelled: "People Who Wanted To Look After Their Fathers". By getting assumptions like that into the open, they can be made to lose their force.

PARENTS AND HOW TO IGNORE THEM

Parents often loom large in my counselling sessions.

Here's how I see the parent thing. Your parents want you to be happy. Most of them say this, and they almost all think it even if they don't say it. To make sure you become happy they give you advice, and it plays over and over in your head like a tape loop: "Get yourself a trade!", "Be a lawyer!", "Don't be too ambitious!", "Don't be an artist!", "Do something real!", and so on.

Suppose you want to reject some such piece of parental advice. How will your parents react? I tell my customers that they'll probably take it quite well. Assuming that they truly do want you to be happy, and if you truly don't believe that following their advice will make you happy, then once they've seen that you've made up your mind they'll step aside and wish you all the best.

People who go for what they truly want are far more likely to impress their parents than those who follow their mere instructions obediently, but without enthusiasm and with concealed rebelliousness. Do anything in that spirit and you'll probably fail. Do your own thing with all your heart and soul and you're far more likely to do well. And because your deepest values and beliefs are profoundly shaped by your parents, you'll almost certainly, if you follow your own path, end up doing something that will deeply impress them, despite all your superficial defiance. This is surely what the parable of the Prodigal Son is partly about.

In the unlikely event that your parents truly don't care if you are happy, but merely want you to be a credit to them or to live out their fantasies, or something else involving their interests but not yours, then do you really owe lifelong obedience to such people?

THE HUMAN MIND IS COMPLICATED

The human mind has been compared to a mansion, with many rooms. Quite right. The mind is not a single small room, with everything laid out clearly and obviously. If it was, counselling of

the sort I do would be superfluous, because the workings of your own mind would be obvious. But they are not obvious, and you are not a fool merely because you sometimes find your own thought processes muddled and baffling. For years on end you may have had one ambition in one room, so to speak, and a quite opposite way of thinking in another room at the other end of your mental mansion. An outsider, unconfused by detail, can sometimes spot connections or contradictions between different thoughts, in different parts of your mind, that you don't see.

A favorite American method for jerking people out of their usual thought patterns is to yell at them. Arsehole! But taking a fresh, look at your life need not be unpleasant. Being confused about your own thought processes and ambitions is not evidence that you are stupid, and certainly not that you are an "arsehole".

One of my more fondly remembered sessions was with the man who wanted to get rich to look after his dad, but who was also keen on higher education, and on computers. What should he do? Get rich? Stay in higher education? Or get into computers? I suggested that he start or join a company which applied computers to higher education. Bingo! He'd never thought of that. This man was absolutely not stupid. He knew more about computers than I'll ever know. It was simply that the various things which were, as the saying goes, "staring him in the face" were doing this from different parts of his mind, and buried under or lying next to other things that were confusing the issue. It took an outsider to put the right things next to each other.

WRITE IT DOWN

But you can do this for yourself. You yourself can get outside your problems, so to speak, by treating them just as you would treat other problems. It regularly amazes me that intelligent, educated people, who wrestle every day with complicated chunks of verbiage about matters that are external to themselves, have never thought through, on paper, their own lives and their own careers.

Do you face a tough this-or-that decision? Put the reasons for and against this in two columns, and the reasons for and against that in another two columns. Cover a pile of scrap paper with words, graphs and diagrams, just as you would if you were reorganising an assembly line or setting up a company IT system.

Writing and re-writing a piece like this one using only a computer screen would for me be like studying a horse using only a magnifying glass. The same may apply to your career thoughts. You may be experiencing each thought only in isolation from the rest. So do a complete print-out, so to speak. Write down all your thoughts. Lay them all out in front of you and see how they might all fit together.

Writing down *all* your concerns also alleviates anxiety. Career paralysis is often induced by the fear that, whatever step you take, you will ignore important but unnamed and unexamined considerations. So name them. Examine them.

EVERYONE IS NOT LIKE YOU

A common unexamined assumption is that we are all alike.

Suppose you believe this. And suppose you want to be a brain surgeon. At the back of your mind — maybe even at the front of it — is the notion that everyone else, being just like you, also wants to be a brain surgeon. So what chance do you have in such a cruelly competitive field? But most people do not want to be brain surgeons. They aren't like you. Their parents raised them differently. They know different things, studied different things, get excited about different things. The number of people wanting to be brain surgeons is accordingly fewer than you are assuming. So give it a go, if that's what you really want to do.

Your particular way of looking at the world is not "normal", not "usual"; it is highly distinctive and individual. Things you do with ease and for fun are things which others would refuse to do no matter how much anyone paid them. Things that you think about naturally baffle others completely. If you can fit your very distinct way of doing things to a distinct niche in the big world out there, you could do really well.

WHAT ARE YOU LIKE?

So it is that much of what I discuss with my customers concerns what sort of people they truly are, and what they truly enjoy and truly care about, given that this is bound to be unusual. I have a whole repertoire of questions to help tease this out.

What have you most enjoyed doing? What have you done best?

What would you be willing to fail at? What would you only want to do if you were sure of success?

Who are the people you've most enjoyed working with? What was so special about them?

When you can do as you like — when all duties are done, all homework completed, all debts paid, all colleagues satisfied, all obligations to "mankind" fulfilled — what do you do? Not: what does your fancy idea of yourself make you wish that you did? Simply: what do you do? Do you seek company? Of what kind? To do what? Are there crowds and noise, or just a few friends? Or are you alone? Again, doing what? (Could you try doing it anyway? If someone paid you to do it, wouldn't that be great?)

If you had all the money, talents and qualifications in the world, what would you then do? Would you lie on a beach in the sun? Or would you actually do quite strenuous things, like sport or travelling? (Again, could you do this anyway?)

What do you daydream about? (Do your daydreams fit what you tell yourself are your ambitions?)

WHAT IS YOUR MODEL OF THE WORLD?

How do you think the world works? How do you apply yourself to that world? Do you see the world as essentially an arena of conflict, or of harmony? Are things done by big teams or small teams? Where do you fit into such teams?

Part of my answer to questions like these involves not just people but ideas, as this piece of writing illustrates. Ideas, as I see the world and as I see myself in the world, rule the world. Good and bad ideas that people have about the world, and about their places in the world, spread themselves around and interact with one another, on their own and in clusters. I grab hold of some of the good ideas and amplify, simplify or polish them, and send them back into battle against the bad ideas. Both my counselling sessions and my writings for the Libertarian Alliance are me doing this, and there's lots of overlap between the personal and the political. There is conflict in my world, but it is between ideas and within people, rather than between people.

Not true, right? There are other things about how the world works which are at least as important and, according to you, far more fun. Which is my exact point. The way I see and do things is not the way you see and do things.

Just as I give advice which can be gone against, so I often describe my model of the world, and other models which I've heard about from other customers, to get a reaction from my present customer. He responds with his own contrasting model, and realises better than before how very individual his model is.

Once I am able to see the world through my customer's eyes, we can together brainstorm new and enticing career ideas, for him to adapt and build on at leisure. If travel comes naturally to you, why not be a travelling salesman, or work for a travel company? If you think people can't be trusted, why not be a security guard, or get into industrial counter-espionage? If what matters to you most is distributing wealth from the lucky to the unlucky, how about insurance? Such suggestions may not identify a new career by name, but they will help to describe what the right career will include and feel like.

VISUALISATION

A common error is to suppose that you can't decide what you daydream about. You can, but how do you change daydreams if you've nothing appealing to change them to? Creating a picture of your perfect life and visualising that is part of the answer. And, as all the creative visualisation books will tell you, to visualise your perfect life is itself a big step towards getting it. The picturing keeps the destination in your mind, and when chances to move

towards it present themselves you'll take them enthusiastically, and in a way that also excites others and gets them on your side.

Visualisation also works for little things, like habits you want to drop or behaviour patterns you want to cultivate. Picture yourself doing what you want, and soon you will be.

BREAD DECISIONS AND BABY DECISIONS

Often my contribution is more modest than I have been implying. Some of my customers already have their plan, and their conversation with me is not so much a cause of their future career triumphs as a sign that these triumphs have already started to unfold. What they need from me is one more check-out, one more look at the scheme from another angle before the plunge is taken, plus whatever tips and tweaks I can suggest.

A recent customer was of this sort. The main thought I added was merely that there were plenty of things she could do to start putting her plan into action without taking any "plunges". She had, she said, been "irrationally" reluctant to make a change. She had withdrawn from the later stages of job interviews, and had even turned down jobs she was offered, "for no reason". Actually, at the back of her mind was the fear of jumping irrevocably from one imperfect but bearable life into another that might be far worse, and there's nothing irrational about that. A thought isn't irrational merely because you don't have it at the front of your mind, and tricked out in the words you need to tell yourself, or me, about it.

What I hope I supplied to this lady — aside from a general optimism about her prospects that I definitely felt after talking with her for a while — was the distinction between the many acts of reconnaissance which she could now energetically do while keeping her present job and income, and the actual kissing of her current job and income goodbye, which would be something else again.

I call these two sorts of decision bread decisions and baby decisions. Bread decisions may safely be done one small slice at a time, with benefits coming straight away. Bread is worth having in small slices, even crumbs. But a bit of a baby isn't just worthless; it's a catastrophe. Baby decisions must be done all at once, with no holding back. If you really would rather dig ditches than work one day longer at your present job, fine. But if your current life works okay and you're merely trying to improve on it, you might want to be more cautious. Maybe you should spend more time sussing out new possibilities, to the point where jumping to one of them ceases to be much of a risk and becomes pure gain.

This bread-baby distinction refers back to the question on the previous page which asks: what would you be willing to fail at? What, for you, would be a satisfactory version of only becoming "half a brain surgeon"? Brain surgeon's assistant? Brain surgeon in another less grand country? Writer about brain surgery? Some other kind of surgeon? Or would being half a brain surgeon be like having half a baby? If your career really is an all-or-nothing deal, and you're okay with that, then okay. I prefer a fall-back position, and so might you if you thought about it some more.

THE PROBLEMS OF FREEDOM

A common complaint is that there's now too much counselling going on. Whatever happened to old fashioned friendship, and to stoicism in the face of adversity? You have problems? Pull your socks up and deal with them.

Insofar as this counselling trend involves the mystification and false professionalisation of old-fashioned neighbourliness or friendship, or people being encouraged to wallow in their problems instead of ever dealing with them, I share such suspicions. Nevertheless, this trend towards people like me selling their friendship services, so to speak, is happening for real reasons.

The trouble is that the world has become fuller both of opportunities and of complexities, but that the traditional sources of advice about how to deal with these opportunities and complexities have become less abundant. People now have more freedom. I realise that it is not usual in a pamphlet published by the Libertarian Alliance to describe freedom as trouble, but it can be.

I recall being told how it felt for a lady from a formerly communist Eastern European country to enter a western-style supermarket. If you wanted toothpaste, in an old-style communist shop, your

only problem was: did they have toothpaste in stock or not? If so, fine, you got your toothpaste. If not, you waited until a supply of toothpaste arrived and you joined the queue. Easy. Often exhausting and time consuming, but easy. But in a London branch of Tesco's, there are about a dozen different sorts of toothpaste! How do you choose? Why is the cheaper toothpaste cheaper? (What's wrong with it?) Why is the expensive toothpaste so expensive? (What's so special about it?) The simplest purchasing decision plunged the wretched lady into a paroxysm of indecision. The more choices you have, the more choices you must make and the sillier you feel if you get them wrong. Freedom in this sense can be a burden. You find yourself wanting freedom from freedom.

And if the freedom to choose between different brands of toothpaste is for some a burden rather than a pleasure, how much more true is this of the process of choosing what to do with the rest of your life?

In days gone by you did what your father or mother did, or you chose a job from the dozen or so jobs that your immediate surroundings offered to you, or if you were the adventurous type you ran away to the Big City and played it by ear. Now, modern communications technology brings a thousand alternative lives to choose between into every living room and even child's bedroom. People now compare themselves with world famous high achievers instead of merely with locally famous ones, and have become far more ambitious. Career counselling has exploded for the simple reason that more people now want "careers".

But the opportunities other people have mean that there may be less personal advice available — less "unconditional positive regard" as we counsellors say — than in simpler, slower times. Need to talk your problems through with someone? Why not try your dad? Not easy, if your parents are divorced and you've not seen him for ten years. So get to know some wise old soul in the pub and bend his ear. Again, tricky, if he'd prefer to be watching football on the giant cable TV that the pub has recently installed.

REBELS AND NON-REBELS

It's easy to exaggerate all this. Most people find friends with whom to talk through their worries. The rebel who siezes his freedom when young, hangs out with other rebels, sorts out the meaning of life in company with his mates, and then chooses when, where and how to rejoin respectable society, needs no "counselling". He knows how to handle freedom, because he's been doing it since the age of fourteen. He knows that his choices can turn round and kick him in the face, because he's been through that a dozen times. The world is full of ultra-effective adults who were only ultra-troublesome when young.

But some rebels get into trouble, trouble and more trouble, and counsellors swarm around them like flies. Not being a "professional", I've not had a crack at counselling any such people, although I'd love to try.

And then there are the non-rebels, the educated ones, the swots, who stay on the rails, do their homework and don't rebel. They can also get into big career muddles. These are the ones who delay longest in cutting their parents down to size, and in deciding whether the rails their parents have laid out in front of them are really how they want to travel. Being intelligent, they mostly deal with their dilemmas and have successful lives, but meanwhile someone like me can be quite a help.

OTHER WRITINGS

This piece doesn't say everything about how I do my counselling, but it says something. What matters to me is that people read my stuff, or do one of my counselling sessions, and then think better about the world and its ways, and about how they might function happily and effectively in it.

I hope that, just as I try to make my counselling sessions fun for my customers, so reading this has been fun for you. If you have enjoyed it, you might also like a previous Libertarian Alliance piece by me called *What The Success Books Say* (Psychological Notes No. 7, 1992), which, unlike this piece, lists some other more famous and expert writings than mine about how to make your life and career go better.