

A farmer's daughter: is there a 'passion' for every 'economy'?

A sterile smell broke through my N95 mask. Within the resuscitation room, my father lay limp on the operating bed. Outside, at almost midnight, light blue skeletons haunted us. Beeping, beeping, the only sound reassuring me of his breath. I was oblivious at first to the red bold timer hung glumly above. Many must have died here instead of life's best promotion: to a wardroom upstairs where bouquets and loved ones await.

Dad had only just turned sixty-five years old. This was meant to herald his new era of happy retirement with the promise of pension support and new-found time. Instead, here I was holding his left hand, his right arm in a cast. His wrist had snapped clean from the impact against the power pole. I reminisced at how those once-strong arms had lifted me to what felt like the highest points in the sky and yet now felt heavy in my own.

I cried silently. It was a slim chance he could hear me, but this stoicism is what I inherited; as a farmer's daughter.

Peter Drucker was furthest from my mind when the emergency doctor signalled me to come out of the room. He explained how routine CT scans are done. Dad was always an exceptional driver, albeit prone to a bit of speeding. A lump formed in my own throat. Lit up in front of me were grey-scale images showing shadows where they shouldn't be. He touched my arm, but I was frozen. Confirmed by MRI scans, Dad has grade 4 brain cancer, and the most aggressive form of this type of tumour he's seen.

'Glioblastoma, once you are diagnosed, has a probability of dying of 100%'. I read this in a brochure provided to me by a brain cancer charity. Its comical effect has not left me – I suppose we all have a probability of dying of 100%.

Time is a commodity that, like money, can be spent, saved, lost, and managed. Time might thus be different for all, but death was surely the ultimate destination for those living.

Despite being in the height of medical marvel, we're motivated by a race against time. Reduced from months to weeks to days as Dad deteriorated significantly. How many summer and winter seasons had dad toiled, waiting for the day when he need not harvest again. 2022 was meant to be his year of letting go of shovel and spade for endless summer days.

It's not lost on me though that through dad's sacrifices, I am lucky to be a creator-entrepreneur. While I don't question whether it was my father's passion to toil and labour in harsh winds and piercing winter rains, I was fortunate to have an education to have many options.

Not long before Dad's prognosis, I read Ernest J. Gaine's novel, 'A Lesson before Dying'. I found it difficult to understand how the character Jefferson's death could become symbolic of the dignity and validation of his life and the lives of his community. Jefferson's last words, "Tell Nannan I walked" is a metaphor to never give up on life. Despite the indignities suffered while Jefferson was living, his life still counted. In Gaine's own words, he wanted to impart on readers that when you get the rotten end of life, you still have a responsibility for yourself. What you do with this time and what you do for others is important - regardless of if you have only days or months, or fifty or more years to live.

Luckily, Dad didn't suffer such injustice. But his life was marked with a question I contend with, seeing as it seemed that almost 365 days a year, for the past forty-five years, most times getting up at 5am every weekend, Dad was working on the land.

In this way, I come to see my father's relationship to this concept of the passion economy differently.

The passion economy is a transition towards working to live, rather than living to work - as my father and his old man had done before him. I know which path I would choose, as I take dad on his wheelchair to the radiation oncology department in the maze of brick buildings and swinging hospital doors. First comes COVID removing all options to travel abroad. Now comes facing Dad's mortality.

We have precious time left, and by the time the 2022 Drucker Forum curtain calls, Dad will no longer be with us.

Like Drucker, I also attended law school and studied International Relations and Political Theory in my undergraduate degree. And yet in my postgraduate studies, which I have now postponed for wholly obvious reasons, I am undertaking it in the commercialisation of technology aka entrepreneurship. Drucker's "concern with the tension between continuity and change as a central polarity in society" led to his "growing interest in technology". It's not lost on me how ironic it is that we both did not continue with the legal profession.

This is the question I feel tense and uncomfortably contend with: is the passion economy exclusive, so that only the few who are fortunate enough, get to proffer in their successes?

Those who possess the ability to create, govern or manage technology, will be the ones to profit from participating fully in the passion economy. I am lucky to have run digital platforms such as CODR and Ampjar, which utilises technologies over the internet to enable greater efficiencies in the justice system and independent e-commerce. Ampjar is particularly relevant, because it allows for a community of other "creators with a purpose"- usually mothers who want to bring to life a product or service they wish they could have had.

Micro-entrepreneurs are intrinsically motivated because they are monetising their individuality and creativity in what sometimes coincides with being known as their passion. I speak to these creators on the growing platform routinely and it's clear to me that this new calling is both to fulfill a need to do one's life's work as well as hopes that this work becomes self-sustaining.

Every person I have interviewed has mentioned 'time' as the reason they started their business, and a 'lack of time' is the reason they use digital platforms to become more productive.

Yes, the rise of online platforms has allowed its users, entrepreneurial citizens, to now build audiences at scale and turn their passions into livelihoods, whether that's playing video games or producing video content. Entertainment, to education to anything digitally consumable may well be important contributions to our economy, but a rise of the passion economy should drive us to question who has the luxury to be able to gain back time, in our single precious lives.

The passion economy should also be seen as what Drucker noted after the writer Walter Bagehot, the "new social institution of the emerging society of organizations"; "emergence of knowledge as the new central resource and knowledge workers as the new ruling class of a *society that is not only "post-industrial" but post-socialist and, increasingly, post-capitalist.*" [Emphasis added].

If the passion economy is leading us into the post-capitalist era, this may be coinciding with wealthy nation government discussions around the world on the Universal Basic Income (UBI). The provision of the UBI will be a society safety net for those who are unable to participate in the passion economy. There are still many more like my father, who would never be able to participate because they do not firstly, have the pre-requisites to enter even the “knowledge society” let alone a post-capitalist one.

Might the passion economy be the paradigm change which Drucker refers to when he seeks out whether there is a fundamental shift in society?

Sure enough, Dad recently remarked to me once that not everyone can make money talking to people online. While I shrugged it off as a stingingly flippant comment, it holds very true considering the global pandemic’s inequities when it comes to our workforce.

Drucker mentions this is the big social challenge of the post-capitalist society: “the dignity of the second class in post-capitalist society: the service workers” – of which Drucker believes will become the majority. This to me seems oversimplistic – hasn’t Drucker simply replaced the Marxist-class model with another version, albeit semantically different, of his own?

According to the Future of Work report in 2021, almost 70% of employees expect to be working for organisations that are a “force for good”. There is a trend, led by younger generations of the workforce – me included – where we want our work to be meaningful and fulfilling. Suggestive of the trend towards the integration of work and passions as means of society continuing to be productive, these changes, as Drucker identified, need to be managed – “an institution-- whether a government, a university, a business, a labour union, an army--can only maintain continuity by building systematic, organized innovation into its very structure.”

Drucker, in his afterword in ‘The Ecological Vision’, leaves on very haunting note:

“The social ecologist believes, must believe, in the sanctity of spiritual creation. Today, there is a great deal of talk about *“empowering” people*. This is a term I have never used and never will use. Fundamental to the discipline of social ecology is *not a belief in power, but the belief in responsibility, in authority grounded in competence and compassion.*” [Emphasis added]

Recently I held a workshop with an organisation, a developer agency, where I was trying to help uncover the ways in which it too can be a ‘force for good’. But a senior software engineer asked quite candidly, “not all of our clients do good things in society, how can we also believe that we are working towards bettering society, when we have to for economic reasons, work with these clients?”. Are we here seeing that organisations are also conforming to this change, by pure necessity, because people can create their own mini-organisations and self-organise? Organisations now seem to be competing against their own staff’s capability to become a “creator” in the passion economy, thereby leaving the organisation biting at the dust of the threat of the Great Resignation.

Drucker stated that “you have to learn to manage in situations where you don’t have command authority, where you are neither controlled nor controlling”. This is both true for organisations but also for creators in the passion economy. Creators must deepen and scale their relationships with their fandom to ensure their survival in this new world.

While Drucker lamented that a post-capitalist society is “fast becoming a society of new 'classes' and with a new central resource as its core”, there is fluidity between these traditional classes unlike

in Marxist thought which is starkly juxtaposed that passion creators must be either worker or capitalist – in fact, in the passion economy, it seems they are often both.

Instead of capitalists and proletarians, Drucker categorises the classes of the post-capitalist society are knowledge workers and service workers. In a post-capitalist world, being an educated person is no longer adequate, not even educated in management. Drucker felt that this new resource or power came from “transmitting information to make it productive, not from hiding it.” If Drucker were alive to watch TikTok videos, I no doubt believe he would see this as an example of this new power transfer.

Drucker’s view, that the application of “knowledge to knowledge”, and the productivity of non-manual workers is what matters. This seems poignantly exemplified by tools characteristic in the passion economy. For instance, Certain skills are rewarded by certain technologies that commands the attention of the day, such as creators who are good at “memefying” on TikTok through mixing content. While I have all the means capable at my disposal to film, I have no inclination for the kind of attention rewarded on current platforms which allow one to monetise on hobbies such as jiggling and dancing to an unknown global audience. Even the thought horrifies me.

In a post-capitalist, post-pandemic world, no longer will citizens have to choose to follow their “art and heart” or a stable job which “brings home the bacon”. That creativity and productivity no longer need to be polar opposites should be celebrated in the passion economy. As human beings, we are more than our outputs. Adding to the complexity is a change in centralised institutional structure such as banks with decentralised transactions using cryptocurrency seen such as how NFTs have been used to support creators and digital artists.

It is oft-said that when you do what you love, it does not feel like work – and how could anyone resist the lure of the promise of the passion economy? I myself have ventured into the passion economy because I felt best able to use my skills to create a positive impact in society than I felt I could as a junior barrister.

Recently I felt this most when recalling the moment the ED nurse asked me whether I needed to head home in the wee hours of a morning the night of my Dad’s car accident. I told her that I work remotely, and given the flexibility, that I’ll be fine. Her reply astonished me: “I wish I had a job like that”. Ashamedly, my first thought was relief that she hadn’t. That she was able to be in this vital job of keeping my Dad alive. I thanked her for her vocation, and for her sacrifice.

In the past few years witnessing frontline workers in the global pandemic, I’m sure we all have counted blessings that there are those whose work in institutions, predominantly healthcare, which enables society to continue functioning. The passion economy raises some very interesting organisation conundrums: if we can longer connect economy to passions, how might we ensure there are still those in essential jobs? It is not to say that there won’t be those who have an uncanny passion towards laborious and necessary work. While I give only an anecdote as an example of work which might be subjectively undesirable and yet essential, it is intuitive that there will less of those who take up the mantles for these positions and if the ‘Great Resignation’ is upon us, we need to be prepared with a plan in mind for ensuring there is not a mass exodus of people from the most undesirable jobs.

Once the passion economy overtakes our current norm, how then might we feed, nurse, and ensure that society still runs? After all, not everyone can or should be a “Youtuber”.

Drucker lamented that what the future society will look like, “let alone whether it will indeed be the 'knowledge society' some of us dare hope for, depends how the developed countries respond to the challenges of this transition period, the post-capitalist period - their intellectual leaders, their business leaders, their political leaders, *but above all each of us in our own work and life.*” [Emphasis added]. How we each relate to and participate in the passion economy is therefore vital to ensuring that no one is left out in this societal transition.

We seem to be at a breakdown in continuity. If we are unable to square how the passion economy can be inclusive of everyone – and not just those able to work remotely - then we are not honouring Drucker’s humane philosophy towards management.

In contrast to Drucker’s view that the productivity of the new classes in the Post-Capitalist Society requires increasing the application of knowledge to work, it appears that machines (and artificial intelligence at that) can increase society’s productivity. Whether this can shed any new light on the question is elusive yet and we have a long way to go in addressing organisational responsibility for ensuring no person is left behind. Maybe once society solely relies on machines to manufacture and produce, the passion economy will become as obsolete a concept as secretive guilds are to us today.

Poet Seamus Heaney describes in his poem, ‘Digging’, a scene which I relate to. Dad would habitually come up the front door and ask me for water and apples on sweltering days. I carried this to him, and he too would fall “to right away / nicking and slicing neatly”.

I don’t believe it was Dad’s passion which led him to work as a farmer. But it certainly has become mine to live sustainably with the land. His work has technically, and quite literally, fed hundreds over the years, and I am incredibly proud of him as he is of me. Will our lives feel equally of value, if they have no interdependent value in and of themselves? If we live not to provide for each-other in unison (if we stretch enough where all our needs are met by machines), what will become of society then?

Small delights – sun streaming through the windows to bask in, purr of the aging cat and curl of our chow-chow pup, a wall of family photos. This is at the end of Dad’s life, and it was all well-worth savouring.

My ambiguity is perhaps encapsulated by Heaney, who wrote so grievously but gracefully,

“But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.
Between my finger and my thumb
the squat pen rests.
I’ll dig with it.”

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