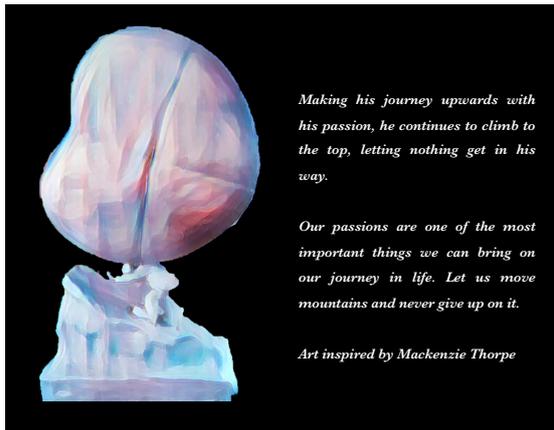


## From the inside walls of the hospital to the outside search for meaning: A journey into Passion Economy



Overcrowded hospital. Cardiac arrest. Respiratory failure. COVID.

These are some of the words I hear every day as a Junior Doctor in Brazil, amidst several heartbreaking situations. I see the suffering in people's eyes and feel the pain of their losses. Loved ones. Children orphaned by COVID. Wives mourning their husband's passing. Parents grieving deceased children.

Some patients would look at me and while holding my hand in Angst, beg me not to let them die, not now. Most would ask for more time. Time to play with their grandchildren. Time to reunite with family. Time to apologize to their relatives. Time to say "I love you" to their spouses one more time.

One of the greatest lessons that the pandemic taught me was that the old *cliché* never made as much sense as it does now: We need to start doing what we love because tomorrow might be too late. This little reflection gave me perspective on the uncertainties of the future. And the truth is that I was privileged. I had the opportunity to hear bitter stories about life regrets and put my own into perspective. In reality, all those stories started very alike: following a college graduation, one decides to work on a temporary job, just for a couple years to save enough money. But that couple year turn to a few, and subtly, it becomes far too many. It is almost as if they were being paid to give up on their dream.

For me, to earn a living doing something I love is not about some idealization or romance. Quite frankly, some days are very tiring, living a sour taste in my mouth. The bruises that the COVID masks left on my face don't lie, neither do the mental scars. But to be able to give my best in helping people is what gives my life meaning.

Don't understand me wrong, I am not naïve, it may sound innocent that we can achieve our dreams by doing what we love, but perhaps one can argue that fear plays a big role in the decision-making process. Every time I decide to put myself out there, publish a paper, enroll on a new project, or create content different from what is expected from me, it takes me a lot of energy to step out of my comfort zone. Sometimes it means less income, sometimes it means less time spent with family & friends, and just because I am following a dream, it does not mean the way is already paved. From where I stand, if a passion is strong enough to endure hardship even in the face of rejection or pain, and there is still a

strong calling towards it, it is worth every sweat and tear. That being said, I delved into my personal experiences as well as reflected on the post-pandemic context to understand what *Passion Economy* could represent in our current social reality.

### **Passion economy in Brazil: Is it Possible?**

The pursuit of new economic possibilities has ushered us into a logic of hyper individualism<sup>1</sup>, which motivates people to shift their focus from institutions and more toward the self. That said, anyone who has a skill or knowledge about their own interests, can monetize it. The so-called *Passion Economy* has become a possibility for Brazilians who, during the pandemic, became unemployed or lost their income.

Data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and statistics (IBGE)<sup>2</sup> show that 8.13 million jobs were closed in Brazil in the first nine months of the pandemic, at the same time there was an exponential growth of aptitude-based businesses<sup>3</sup>. However, the socioeconomic difficulty of certain regions in Brazil makes it difficult and sometimes extremely unlikely for one to survive based on their individual passions.

Here, where I live in Brazil, on the northeast coast, breathtaking beaches and yearlong summers contrast with extreme poverty and violence. More than a half of the population - over 1 million people - earn their living with less than 3.5 US\$ per day, struggling for access to clean water, basic education, and work<sup>4</sup>. That said, for some, the idea of *Passion Economy* is merely a luxury developing countries cannot afford.

But in fact, I believe it to be quite the opposite.

More than a fancy dressing, *Passion Economy* is a tendency that is being embraced all over the globe, especially in Brazil, where hard labor is rooted in our Brazilian culture and push us to finding creative ideas to overcome daily struggles. Formal workers at daytime find strength to supplement their income at night as small entrepreneurs, capitalizing their abilities in order to make rent at the end of the month. I perceive this since, as a doctor, people share with me all sorts of stories. I learn about the uncertainties of their jobs but also about what makes them get out of bed in the morning. Many have learned to live with difficulties since childhood due to the lack of food, water, and other items that we take for granted every day. But even so, they carry the will to fight for a dignified life. It is not unusual to receive gifts brought with care by some of these patients. Some who love to cook bring cheese and jams. Others, create beautiful wood carvings, and some portray minute paintings from the *Sertão Pernambucano*. They all have something in common, the dream of living off their passions.

To that end, how to encourage people to achieve their goals and live a meaningful life?

Unfortunately, the answer is not that simple and, for developing countries, like mine, it is even more challenging. Still, Education comes to light as one of the most powerful weapons to change this reality. It is possible to empower people in areas that are fulfilling for them. For me passion economy is not about how difficult is the job at hand, but it is about giving a sensation of fulfillment to the person who executes it, enabling more enjoyable and sustainable work. For that purpose, according to the world Economic Forum, there is a growing popularity of online platforms<sup>5</sup> for low-income communities, focused on teaching a myriad of subjects, which facilitates the connection between those who have something to teach and others who want to consume that knowledge in order to follow their dreams. That's why, as I see it, *Passion Economy* is not just about selling

an idea, but also about those who learn, because there is the possibility of creating meaningful change, which can have a relevant impact in the lives of so many people.

Proof of this is that it is estimated over 50% of content creators in Brazil rely solely on social media for their livelihood<sup>6</sup>, stating that the pandemic was a source of opportunities. I am not short of stories about people who transmuted their passions into their way of living. For example: one of my old friends became unemployed and, in search for creative income ideas, she gave a shot to her passion: the kitchen. She began to publish recipes and create content online. The success was so remarkable that she was able to make a living out of it. I am not implying the system is flawless, she faces hardships every day, which could be challenging to the most skilled of managers. Still, despite all these issues, she continues her journey with bravery, motivating people around her and advocating the beauty of *Passion Economy*.

For all the above reasons, I wonder if Drucker's visit to Brazil might have influenced his early-stage work, upon seeing the resilience of the Brazilian people. When asked about his standpoint, he stated<sup>7</sup>: "I know the tremendous problems in Brazil, but there has been enormous progress, both social and economic, but mainly psychological".

It is exactly this psychological dimension, necessary for those who decide to dedicate themselves to the *Passion Economy*, that will be addressed in the next part of this essay.

### **A reflection on Drucker, Medicine, and Passion**

The first time I learned about Drucker's work I was studying for a test in med school. Somehow, I came across one of his aphorisms that is, to this day, one of my favorites: Drucker in his own words<sup>8</sup>: "*every decision is like surgery. It is an intervention into a system and therefore carries with it the risk of shock*".

This claim seems to be in synchrony with what I have discussed so far. The uncertainty about what might happen when a certain decision is made appears to be the limiting factor for not taking action. Inertia according to Newton is a property of bodies to resist changes in their velocities<sup>9</sup>. Thus, if someone is stable in their job, even though it might not be fulfilling, is only a natural tendency to remain there. That is the reason why for me to understand the *Passion Economy* domains, it is necessary to understand first what moves people. After all, as a doctor it is indeed the subject of my work: People. Drucker<sup>10</sup> seems to agree with me, as he once wrote "I'm more interested in people than I am in how businesses work."

When I went through the term *Passion Economy*, the first thing that became clear to me was the sense of community. People bonded by common interests who no longer want to only dedicate themselves to it in their spare time, but instead want to commit to that passion, so it can occupy a significant part of their lives. Steve Jobs in one of his speeches<sup>11</sup> said: "The only way to do great work is to love what you do, don't settle. These words resonated strongly and ideas like this are increasingly gaining strength in the media spotlight, being heard by young people like me who are beginning to flourish in the job market. Proof of this is that one of the fields of medicine that investigates the human mind, positive psychology<sup>12</sup>, argues that happiness yields success, rather than the inverse. That being said, what drives someone to be passionate about an idea, regardless of being a content creator, a manager, a musician, a machine learning specialist or a Neurosurgeon?

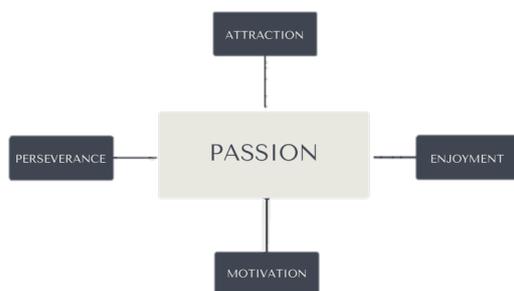
I'm not going to turn this essay into a scientific paper about the neurobiology of the brain or talk about the action of dopamine in activating the caudate nucleus and prefrontal cortex. Rather, my objective, is to understand how the *Passion Economy* can transform the lives of so many people, after all it's not just about Money, it's about fulfillment. To that end, passion can be broken down into emotional experiences<sup>13</sup> of *attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance*.

-Attraction: The element that individuals search themselves for on their quest to find work that they love

-Enjoyment: Individuals look forward to going into work and feel gratified by it

-Motivation: Propels individuals to continue grow in skill

-Perseverance: The capacity to navigate through unfavorable and difficult circumstances



The way I understand it, rather than describing *Passion Economy* as an ideal experience in which work no longer feels like work, perhaps being passionate about it means to have a higher tolerance for the difficulties that appear<sup>14</sup>, and even shift the focus to a more pleasant understanding of things. It is not that we will always feel motivated, in fact is quite the opposite, there will be days we face struggles and more than ever is my obligation as a physician to raise awareness on the importance of mental health in that process.

During the COVID Pandemic, many Health Care professionals started social media pages to spread information about the virus<sup>15</sup>. One of the reasons that happened is that the sense of being useful motivates us toward the future, by emphasizing the individuality of people on both sides of the equation. Consequently, fake news is avoided and both the producer and the consumer benefit from this. In other words, it is possible to earn an income, while doing fulfilling work. Hence, in this new chapter of the 21st century, I wonder if how we attempt to create a life of personal intention, meaning and decency is the true remark of success, since new mindsets and behaviors translate not only the importance of the outcome but also *why* and *how* we do things.

Drucker used to say he was a “social ecologist,” observing our man-made environment the way a natural ecologist examines the biological world<sup>16</sup>. This attempt to better understanding what drives us as individuals may help us gain some perspective about ourselves.

After seeing firsthand the devastating situation that has occurred over the past two years, I am proof that the obstacles we’ve come across as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a warning. Instead of waiting for the right time to come, or for the better

time to start pursuing a passion, start today. There is a saying in medicine: *Start slow, go slow but go*. It is not about doing it all at once, it is about stepping away from our comfort zone with meaningful gestures that cost us nothing but courage.

My journey so far has taught me that everyone always has something to offer, no matter where they come from, their gender, ethnicity, or income. We can always learn from each other's passions.

## **Don't try**

At a first glance it might seem a little controversial or even clickbait to use this title for the last part of the essay. However, those exact words - *Don't try* - are the epitaph carved in the gravestone of the American Writer, Charles Bukowski. It may come as a surprise that this is the final message of a person who spent almost 30 years of his life trying and failing all over again as a writer, barely earning a living at the post office only to become arguably one of the most prominent writers of American literature<sup>17</sup>. How is it possible that a man who found such immense respect and success all because of his relentless trying could leave as his final remarks the words "*don't try*"?

If one ventures to read his story more closely, in one of the letters he wrote to his friend William Packard, the answer could be found. That is, if you have to try to care about something or try to want something, perhaps you don't want it. Throughout his life, Bukowski never let the rejection take writing away from him. It is not that he didn't try. He didn't try to be someone that he wasn't, he just kept on doing what he truly loved.

At least in my life, I realized that I seem to perform at my best when I am natural and honest to myself, Without the addition of ulterior motives. However, it does not necessarily follow that a passion must come easy to a person in order for it to be the right thing. But if the pain of working through the process, does not fell worth it, and one is not compelled to do it in the face of rejection and hardship perhaps here the words *don't try* would fit perfectly. But, if the thought of not doing something is terrifying and you feel compelled to do it even in the face of all struggles, if a life without it is unthinkable, then go all the way. As Drucker would put it<sup>18</sup>, "There is the risk you cannot afford to take, and there is the risk you cannot afford not to take".

It is only logical to finish this Essay with one of Drucker's interviews describing one of his lifelong passions:

**Interviewer:** If you describe your occupation, would it be 'writer'?

**Drucker:** I always say I write.

**Interviewer:** What, then, has inspired your books more than anything?

**Drucker:** The same thing that inspires tuberculosis. This is a serious, degenerative, compulsive disorder and addiction.

**Interviewer:** An addiction to writing?

**Drucker:** To writing, yes.

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