More than just a job
White and blue-collar conversations about why work matters

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  June 14, 2009

THE PLEASURES AND SORROWS OF WORK
By Alain de Botton
Pantheon, 326 pp., illustrated, $26

Driving aimlessly in the Mojave Desert, Alain de Botton, author of "How Proust Can Change Your Life" and "The Architecture of Happiness," stumbled across an airport, with a hangar, two Cessnas, and a landing strip. At the far end of the runway, cordoned off by barbed wire, planes from every continent sat unattended. A few had lost their noses; others had no undercarriages. Asking an attendant for permission to take a closer look, de Botton explained that his "desire to investigate these semi-ruined objects, though personal in nature, nevertheless fits into a long Western tradition of preoccupation with the remnants of collapsing civilisations." The attendant suggested that he leave before he got his backside filled with lead.

In the post-industrial age, de Botton believes, most of us know next to nothing about the products, brand new and broken down, that surround us. And so, in "The Pleasure and Sorrows of Work," he swims "upstream in order to observe the forgotten odysseys of crates, to witness the secret life of warehouses." His aim is "to mitigate the deadening, uniquely modern sense of dislocation between the things we so heedlessly consume in the run of our daily lives and their unknown origins and creators."

Exquisitely written - and enhanced by Richard Baker's photos - the book is at once a richly detailed account of tuna fishing, cookie-making, career counseling, and accountancy, and a perceptive philosophical meditation on work, with "its extraordinary claim" to provide, along with love, the principal source of meaning in our lives.

These days, few men and women can point to an object as the sole repository of their skilled labor. Nonetheless, de Botton suggests, we should not restrict "the idea of meaningful work too tightly," by exalting - or envying - only "doctors, the nuns of Kolkata or the Old Masters." The "real issue is not whether baking biscuits is meaningful, but the extent to which the activity can seem to be so after it has been continuously stretched and subdivided across five thousand lives and half a dozen different manufacturing sites."

De Botton believes that it can - and has. The accountants he met in Birmingham, England, he observes, exhibited an "earnest pride in their mastery of a labyrinthine craft." Emily Han, a 20-something transfer from the Shanghai office, with exceptional grades from Jiao Tong University, compares accounting to carpentry, claiming that capitalism could not function without her.

Unlike Han, however, de Botton implies that most of us do not - and will not - find fulfillment at work. Our jobs won't bring bountiful sums of money. We won't craft exquisite or exemplary objects. Instead, if we're plucky and lucky, we'll make "the painful psychological adjustments required by life in modernity." The accountants, he guesses, have decided to be satisfied as long as they have the "inner freedom" to do what taxi drivers do - use their navigational skills to take their customers wherever they want to go. They have accepted, with existential grace, "the paucity of opportunities for immortality in audit."

The makers of glutinous, chocolate-covered Moments at a United Biscuits plant in the English town of Hayes have an even tougher adjustment to make. Seated in a windowless hall, suffused with smells of sugar, they face each other over a moving rubber carpet, donned in hair nets, searching for faults in globs of dough. They know that at any moment a miscalculation in branding, a rise in the price of wheat, or an interruption in the supply of cocoa, could idle them and they could lose their houses. As they struggle to survive, with row after row of biscuits passing by, de Botton indicates, in sadness and admiration, they retain enough energy for spirited conversation.

At bottom, however, "The Pleasure and Sorrows of Work" is more prescriptive than descriptive. In the 21st century, de Botton concludes, work should be embraced not as a noble calling but as a useful distraction from the great sadnesses embedded in human existence. When we take our tasks seriously, "with utter determination and gravity even when their wider non-sense is clear," he writes, poignantly, our diligence "must destroy our sense of perspective, and we should be grateful to it for precisely that reason, for allowing us to mingle ourselves promiscuously with events, for letting us wear thoughts of our own death and the destruction of our enterprises with beautiful lightness, as mere intellectual propositions, while we travel to Paris to sell engine oil."

Investing our "immeasurable anxieties" on small-scale, achievable tasks may well be "working wisdom." But, as de Botton knows, it may not be nearly enough to check-mate our "solitary feelings of shame and persecution for having stubbornly failed..."
'Pleasures and Sorrows of Work' examines meaning behind the daily grind - The Boston Globe

to become who we are."

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