

Peter Fields



What a hope

Around the corner there is something better

The present is an unreliable world. And this may not be a problem. Paradoxically, the unreliability of the context might open up interesting, moving news for young people. Caught up and understood by the demand for work, for stability, for construction. Of life projects. The tale of a young physics researcher provoked by a dialogue with an older man. A train ride unexpectedly in good company. Two lives so far apart coming together. Thoughts and words punctuated by the retiree that prick the young interlocutor to the quick. A profitable journey. On time though off time...

Recently, I took a long weekend to visit my brother and his family in Minnesota. I took the train out of Chicago and west through rural Wisconsin. Watching the wild flowers and farm fields undulate past my window was a calming respite my busy life needed. Hours passed. The sun was setting over the Mississippi River when my reverie was pleasantly interrupted by the man sitting next to me. Felix was an older fellow and recent retiree. Naturally, he began to reminisce about his life. We spoke for hours of his children, his hobbies (he raced cars in his youth), his now-deceased wife, and his job.

He worked his whole life in the grocery business; his grandfather, an immigrant, founded what is now one of the most successful Italian markets in Milwaukee. He described how he spent a year or so in college only to go back to work for his father. He stayed there the rest of his life, or Felix put it, "I could not stay away!" He loved it too much, every part of it: experiencing the cuisine and culture, interacting with the regulars, listening to relatives tell stories of the old country. "Do something you love everyday," he explained to me, "and that's it! You'll be happy."

His words stung a bit. I had just been meditating on how my busy life burns me out. I'm only 25 years old and who sits next to me but the paragon of the American dream? An old man who has stayed and will stay forever young at heart while I, a young man, struggle to maintain my own vitality.

We want stable opportunities

The sun sank lower over the wide river, but very slowly, as happens when you're traveling west. It was getting dark. I asked Felix straight up if he thought it was harder nowadays for young people to find a job they loved. He thought not, but after a pause he qualified his answer: "it seems like you have a lot of distractions to deal with though."

He then told some stories of how he saw his younger relatives meandering from job to job until they found something satisfying. One of them, inspired by Netflix cooking shows, wanted to become a chef. This did not last, however. The "distractions" I think he was referring to

were the various portrayals of happiness so readily available across television, social media, movies, and so on. For Felix, finding the job that satisfied was a matter-of-fact business. He worked for his father's business and then he went to school to become an accountant. He looked at his experience and then looked within himself and simply chose what he liked more.

I envy the fulfilling stable job Felix had had and the strong base it seemed to provide for all the other factors of his life—his family, his free time, his hobbies. To my mind, I think it is this that I and so many of my peers desire: stability—but in the broadest sense, not only financially. We want stable opportunities. We want stable relationships with our colleagues and clients. We want a stable life! Though what this means in more exact terms is no longer clear.

I suppose this is a function of the “distractions” Felix spoke of. The bombardment of other people's versions of happiness is enough to make one forget to look at their own experience and within themselves, or at least to do so in simple terms. I am not sure, however, that such distractions can fully account for the lack of clarity.

Quite frankly, I do not feel equipped to make any claim as to what the whole story is, that is, to make a sweeping generalization of how my generation goes about finding and defining job stability and satisfaction. Such sweeping generalizations of my generation has always struck me as a habit of older generations—a practice done by those trying to understand in simple terms what we see—and I think we see rightly—as complicated. Work, productivity, leisure... ask me or any of my peers and they are all bound to give different answers.

For us young people the world is unstable!

I should come clean as to why I feel, personally, the difficulty of this task of categorization of the young workers of this world.

I was born in 1997. I am old enough to remember a time without unfettered internet access, but too young to feel any acute nostalgia for it. (For context, my first phone was a flip phone I received at age 12, largely because my mother wanted me to contact me when I hung out with friends after school). iPhones (and Blackberries) were luxuries your cool friends could afford, but one among many others, like bicycles and sneakers and so on. Facebook and the like was only just getting popular in my demographic. My childhood was defined by such a fluidity in the general milieu that a culture of stability (which I'm sure the 2008 recession put many nails in the coffin of) was an exception, not the rule.

This is the origin of my distaste for the categorization of my generation, if such a thing exists: it's easy to categorize when reality moves slowly, but that is not my reality, and even less so than for anyone younger than me. I feel much more in common with someone 10 years older than I do 5 years younger. And for those younger than me, I'm sure they'll feel the same, but with both numbers shrinking on each side.

If you can see past the snark of this digression of mine, I hope you'll find the larger point: my world has changed and will continue to change far faster and far more than the older generations' ever had. For us young people, the world is unstable!

Where will we turn to find stability? The government, large corporations, start-ups, city life, suburban life, entrepreneurship, moving to the countryside, moving to another country altogether? For everyone, and I mean for everyone I know the answer is different. The young

person is no longer a type. (But what an opportunity this is! Extra work must be done to see the young person in front of you, since no stereotypes really fit any of us anymore).

Nevertheless, the question of how stability can be realized remains. And such a lack of clarity regarding its answer can be a great motivator. For some, the more its image blurs, the more they can't help but pine for it. I know of one person who's main goal is to ensure he never has to work again and all his income can become passive. To this end he works non-stop, and is always at least 2 weeks ahead of any and all deadlines. The irony seems potent to me; in an attempt to achieve a passive and stable income he has become very busy. Is this a good or grotesque example? Are some of us becoming very motivated workers who can adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of the economy? Or are we merely slaves of our jobs more than willing to sacrifice our leisure time? This I do not know. Those in similar circumstances have to make the evaluation for themselves. What is not in question, however, is the power this lack of stability can have in the young person's psyche.

The example of professional artists

Do not get me wrong. I do not deny that there are people who have followed the route of Felix—the route of a simple, satisfying job that one occupies for the rest of his life. I can only say that in my experience I can only count on one hand the young people who have told me as much.

Some of my friends who occupy stable nine-to-fives often tell me of the boredom they struggle with. Traditional stability—staying at the same company for many years doing the same thing (loyalty it's sometimes called)—seems to have lost its luster. This may appear to be in contradiction with the envy I felt for Felix's stable job. It's important to recall Felix was never bored with his work. It was not only the stability of his income I envied. Its stable fulfillment at a stable job us young people desire. The fact that there is a rejection of obtaining this via traditional means is just another symptom of the broad lack of clarity us young people feel.

This experience of the unreliable nature of work mixed with a desire to do something worthwhile is not anything new however. It is more widespread now, but certainly not new. I am referring to professional artists. Actors, musicians, painters. Their example can be a telling analogy for us young workers. Professional artists have always felt a tension between the desire for job stability and a need for creativity. Wanting to perform Shakespeare but performing in a television commercial can be a sobering reality. But with this tension comes a kind of maturity—a stoic resolve that begins to be born when one really, truly faces the difference between what one wants in his heart and what he is forced to make with his hands. It is the slow realization that perhaps it is indeed possible to face the reality that is given instead of what one imagines, while at the same time still maintain one's inner creativity, one's primordial spark. Perhaps this is the lesson that young people of all professions are beginning to learn. And of course, this lesson is not learned without much trial and restlessness. But it is an age-old restlessness that only young people know, and though it manifests differently than it used to, it can always turn into a mature hope if cared for properly.

Indeed, this unreliable world we live in can make us young people hopeful, perhaps even with us not being aware of it. I am not speaking of optimism or positivity, but rather the tacit intuition that something better is just around the corner. Is this not our greatest work in society beyond finding jobs and raising families? To be the bearers of such hope?



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