

"And how will you make a living with that?"

Questioning work and its perception

By Johannes Schmidt

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"And how will you make a living with that?" That's one of those questions you probably hear a lot when you decided to leave the path the educational system provides for you. It's a simple question that includes concern in the best case. But mainly it's self-revelation. How did the person asking that question ended up thinking about financial security as the very first thing? And how come the person insists you mirror this mindset?

"And how will you make a living with that?" is a question we hear already in our early days in school. It's showing us the limit of how far off we can go without making a big mistake. Or potentially "ruin" our life. And this limit is tight! If you want to avoid it, better become a physician, a lawyer, or an engineer. Jobs that have proven to be needed and well-paid over decades are a good start. There is no need to explain those jobs or their importance. It is only fair enough that nobody will ask you how to make a living with that. But that's not the solution - isn't it? Not everybody wants or can become a physician or lawyer for multiple reasons. Also, there is no need for that many.

We live in a truly diverse society. Our desires and needs vary depending on cultural backgrounds, social situations, education, and our family environment. And that is good. Not just good, it's probably one of the most significant features of our species. Desires and diversity are what

separate us from non-human-creatures, but also machines. That's why we should redefine the terms job, wage labor, and making a living.

If we think about a job in the sense of work to make a living, we have parameters to rate its quality and make it comparable. There are mainly money, time, and maybe the amount of paid days off. These parameters are easy to get because we can express them in plain numbers. But what about the working conditions, a balanced workload, the collegial atmosphere, responsibility, room for personal and professional development, and well-being? These parameters we can't either express in numbers. Nor can we easily compare them to other people's jobs because they're not supposed to. We should measure them against our personal demands.

But now it gets tricky! What are my demands? It's something the general education neglects. We are prepared to work, earn money, and make a living. Already the phrase "making a living" makes it clear because we use it synonymously for earning money. Right from the start, our personal demands are exclusive. When that's the foundation of our education, we go to school and learn only to make money. Even worse. Our work is also supposed to be laborious and draining. It's not supposed to be fun or even fulfilling. "Get a real job," they say. An attitude with which also Frithjof Bergmann had to deal when he raised the question "what you really, really want to do" as the essence of the *New Work* movement he started in the 70s. Bergmann was clear that this "real job" can't be what we really want. It appeared necessary to ask "what we really, really want" to target our personal demands appropriately.

Back then, lots of workers in the car industry became redundant through progressing automatization. Not only were they financially insecure after

losing their jobs, but they were also personally lost. Their work had been the center of their life, and it had suppressed all personal demands. Bergmann's concept *New Work* was the first attempt to help them find out what they "really, really" wanted and let this become decisive for their lives. Unsurprisingly, this was no easy endeavor at all. After years of living with the unquestioned misconception of work, it's hard to shift the view. First, people have to unlearn the misconception before they can even focus on discovering and shaping personal demands.

So why should we wait for the moment we realize our misconception? We should learn from those examples and general education accordingly. As a first step, we have to break the paradigm that education primarily serves one purpose: earning money. Children should grow up with an education that promotes their natural gifts and desires right from the start. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss different ways of life instead of aligning everybody to one direction. It needs a holistic view of things. Life doesn't subordinate to work. Work is much more a part of life, and it should align with personal principles and desires. A holistic view should expand to the fact of how we perceive another human being. We tend to reduce ourselves to our most prominent role in society. Unfortunately, that's often our job role.

To change and prevent this, we should enable children to explore their possibilities in more genuine ways. An approach could be to integrate "more experienced humans" into classes in school. Everybody has an own story and works as an authentic example. What a 25-year-old or a 50-year-old has to tell might be very helpful to a high school student. Not just focussing on the work, but on the whole life. Talking about life decisions and their reasons and effects will even help both sides. Students would get a far brighter perspective on possible ways to live their lives. And the older ones telling their story might become more

conscious about the decisions they made. Maybe they even rethink them. This kind of exchange can be inspiring and can also prevent misjudgments. It contains so much more than reading a job description in a school book. And suddenly it's not only a discussion about the money you earn for certain professional activities. It's about meaningful questions.

On what did you base your decision on what to study? And why? How much effort did you put into your professional career? How did this affect your social environment? Is your life balanced? Do you feel healthy? What did you have to sacrifice to achieve your goals? Was it worth it? Will you see it the same in ten years? In 20 years? Are you living in the city you like? Are you having enough time for your friends, your children, your partner? Is your work satisfying? Does it matter to you or anyone? What are your goals? Are you happy?

It will also help to become aware that the answers to these life-defining questions can't be right or wrong. Nor are they steady. But they need to be discussed! This understanding is essential because it allows us to see life as something malleable. We don't pick an irreversible option once we leave the school. Therefore it's necessary to develop an open mind and confidence in taking our demands seriously.

It's inevitable to practice this. Making decisions, iterating them, and constant self-reflection have to become routines. And this requires a relaxed way of dealing with failure. Entrepreneurs, researchers, designers already internalize this fact. There's plenty of books about failing and how important it is to "fail" early. It only makes sense. The earlier we "fail, the earlier we can learn from our mistakes and improve in the future. An attitude that general education should promote. As

opposed to that, schools and the parental environment are critical of failure. The consequence is mental pressure and fear of failure.

The same applies to the school grading system. It doesn't reward ambitious ideas, experimental approaches, and most certainly not failures. Thereby, students only learn to align and meet predefined goals. In school, we work for grades, and after that, we work for money. To counteract this, we should focus much more on our own goals and the steps to achieve them. Not just in school, but always. It's the only way to arouse real motivation and commitment. It will automatically cause better results and higher personal satisfaction.

The sad truth is that not paying attention to financial security is a great privilege that very few can afford. But the question "And how will you make a living with that?" should never guide us when it comes to what we want or what interests us. Desires are precious, and we should treat them like that. If a longing occurs to us, we should follow it. And we should engage others to act the same. How else can we find out what we "really, really" want if we're not even trying?