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Kristin Dombek

The Help Desk

by Kristin Dombek



Hi Miss Dombek,

I have a question that pretty much sums up the core theme of my adult life. In my youth, as I began to take jobs and find my way, my confusion at the meaninglessness of most employment took the form of amusement; dull, exploitative labor was an odd feature of American life I noticed and playfully railed against, almost imitating the kind of things you'd hear real, working adults say. Now, as I approach my forties, this confusion has become a white-hot festering rage that runs at all times in the background of my day to day.

Miss Dombek, is there something wrong with me that I find regular employment to be the most soul-oppressing thing I can imagine? How can someone undergo the spectrum of emotion and concentration necessary to create something beautiful—a real and full life, even—while holding down work enough to survive? Aren't we really all being exploited to one extent or another, with largely menial, unimportant posts (except for maybe those on the tippy-top), just to keep this whole thing going? How can I choose not to be a part of this construct and still eat?

Sincerely yours,

Bank-robbin' in Brooklyn

Dear Bank-robbin' in Brooklyn:

First of all, Marx didn't call it alienated labor for nothing, dear. It's not called "nose to the grindstone" because it feels good. It's not called "keep your head down" because it's wise to look

around. You have been trained from childhood to think that labor, in and of itself, is both a right and one of the most important goals of your life; you have been told that your "career" is the same thing as "who you are in the world." Yet like most employed people in the United States, you work jobs that you consider to be banal, brutal, or both.^① For this labor you are supposed to be grateful, since work is increasingly hard to get: if you lose your shitty job, you've got only a one-in-five chance of finding a new one, and if you've been unemployed for six months or longer your chances are one in ten.^② While you look, there is hardly a safety net; Congress shredded it. Follow the logic of this drive to profit on the back of shitty labor (the difficult labor that is either necessary or not, but purchased by employers for less than the value it creates) and bullshit labor (often in industries invented to distract, placate, and endlessly "connect" us and imprison us in debt while we work shitty or bullshit jobs) and you will find the same drive to create wealth for those on the "tippy-top" that has us hell bent on fracking until California burns and New Orleans and New York and Miami drown. This is no longer some unimaginable possible future, it is happening now: the West Antarctic ice sheet has begun to split apart

Is there something wrong with you? If you are unusual, it is because you are refusing to keep your head down. Why do you keep looking around? There's so much to distract and comfort you, if you could just keep your head down, that is, in your computer. Keep your head down; Solange Knowles has kicked Jay Z in an elevator. Keep your head down; James Franco has 2 million followers and he has taken off his shirt and seems to be pulling down his underwear. Keep your head down; Ryan Gosling is still wearing his T-shirt but it has a picture of Macaulay Culkin on it wearing a T-shirt with a picture of Ryan Gosling on it, a three-ton great white shark has been eaten either by an even bigger great white shark or possibly by the Leviathan, and Bill Murray has crashed another wedding. Are you not entertained?

*Everything is upside down.
Your life is sold to serve an
economy that does not serve
your life. -Tweet*

You don't seem to be entertained, Bank-robbin'; your white-hot rage festers. It probably doesn't

help that you live in Brooklyn—this place where in the last ten years rent has spiked 77 percent while real median income has dropped,^③ where the rich (the top 10 percent of earners who, as is well known, control 80 percent of the wealth) and their children live right on top of some of the worst poverty known to this country, while 20 percent of Brooklynites survive somehow below the poverty level,^④ such that the widening income and wealth gap^⑤ becomes achingly visible here. I could advise you to leave Brooklyn. But I don't want you to leave Brooklyn.

Everything is upside down. Your life is sold to serve an economy that does not serve your life. So should you turn to crime, if you haven't already? Do whatever it takes to avoid participating in this "construct," risking hunger, imprisonment, or dependence on people with real jobs, who've learned to keep their heads down?^⑥ Should you learn to do a better job hiding your soul from the oligarchs and make what is beautiful on nights and weekends, if you can get them, when you are not too tired, and have not drunk yourself into numb oblivion? Or should you sacrifice years of your life to educate yourself, incur massive debt,^⑦ and "put in your time" to qualify for a job that might feel more like "creating something beautiful," only to risk turning that very beauty into "the most soul-oppressing thing [you] can imagine," too? Should you try to work harder, save more, get your hands on some capital, even though the game seems impossibly rigged, so that if you do work out how to make a profit, it will be incredibly difficult to do so without replicating the system of exploitation that enrages you?

I do not have the nerve to shoplift even a grape, but aside from crime, I have tried each of these strategies myself. Since the age of 12 I have worked forty-five different jobs. I counted for you. No, I am not 300 years old, Bank-robbin'; I worked most of these two or three at a time, like a real patriot, since none of them paid enough to live on. What I will have to say to you, by the end of this, is that anyone who has found a way to transform anger into purpose and even some measure of peace about work has learned to reckon with two contradictory truths:

1. Most work seems designed to make you feel absolutely alone, and...
2. Almost everyone, if they are honest with themselves, feels exactly like you about much of the work they do.

The space between these two truths is interesting. It is in acknowledging the relation between them that you might find, even within this construct, some room to make "a real and full life." And one of the steps toward doing this is exactly what you have done: to reveal, in whatever means at your disposal—with friends, co-workers, in writing, in whatever art you do, and in political action—what shitty work is like, and how much you're paid, and how the exploitation you've described registers in your mind and body, and what you think about the absurdity of living in service of an economy that requires you to sell your labor for much less than it's worth. I do not say this lightly, as if it is some kind of easy answer, but I do think it is currently one of the most effective ones. Both exploitative labor and the inability to find exploitative labor make you feel ashamed. But you should not be. We have to get over the feeling of shame at having failed to find a "meaningful career," this staggering gap between what we are supposed to want and what is possible for most of us. We have to use every opportunity to make transparent the nature of work and the real consequences of the embargoing of wealth by those at the "tippy-top," to reveal work as being as strange as it really is: to say over and over, things are upside down.

Yet still I feel ashamed when I think about some of the work I have done and why I have had to do it. My family failed epically when it came to finding meaningful and lucrative employment; my father was sick in bed, and my mother, a part-time nurse to him, and part-time piano teacher who earned about \$11,500 a year. We made do with Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC, cut by Clinton and the Republican Congress of 1996), and GrandmaCare. So it started when I was a child, the constant miserable work at as many shit jobs as possible. I've thrown bales of hay onto a flatbed truck in hot Indiana fields, painted apartments and barns, and babysat dozens of children. I have been a nanny to a cataclysmically temperamental redheaded 6-year-old with a brown belt in tae kwon do, and to a pair of depressed, ice-cream-splattering suburban Grand Rapiidian toddlers. I have cleaned the houses of dozens of wealthy Hoosiers and Michiganders and Chicagoans, and I have done their laundry. I have sold appliances and weird women's clothing in strip mall department stores. For \$6.10 an hour, I have folded shop towels in a 105-degree industrial laundry facility for a company called National Dust Control. I have laid each towel flat out on

the table, folded it, turned it to the side with my right hand while drawing the next out of the cart with my left, folded it, turned it and piled it on the one before, done this twenty times, and moved each stack to the side, made ten piles like this, walked around the table to the binding machine, positioned the stack and pulled a lever so the machine would tie the stack tightly in string, put the stacks in another cart. I have done this thousands of times. I have picked up the phone and called people while they were eating dinner to persuade them to subscribe to a newspaper they did not want to subscribe to, and about which they'd been called the week before, and put down the phone and checked a box and picked up the phone again. I have picked up the reamer, run the air grinder along every sharp edge, put the reamer down, picked up the next one, done this 800 or so times, gone home, and come back and done it again. Thousands of times, for a dozen or so employers, I have made documents in Excel or in Word, walked to another part of the office to the printer to get them, walked back to my desk, put the right color tag on each document where it needed to be signed, answered the phone, put the document in a certain folder, put the folders in my boss's office, either on her chair or in her In-box, depending on what she preferred or the urgency of the document, and picked up other folders. Back in the cubicle, I have answered the phone, taken signed documents from other folders and put them into interoffice mail envelopes and put them in my Out-box, answered the phone, and then made more documents and done it all again. Are you even reading anymore?

Imagine this paragraph being twenty years long.

I have moved furniture, run a moving service for the disabled and impoverished, entered codes concerning deposed and depressing corporate documents into a computer for a paralegal company. I have walked out the door on my lunch break when I could not code another deposed and depressing corporate document and, instead of going to the Blimpie's to get a sub, convinced a coworker to drive twenty-four hours straight south from Michigan to New Orleans, where I'd wake and bake and call in sick until one morning I woke and baked and called in and quit. But when the previous week's paycheck ran out, I hitched a ride back north to find another job and do it all again.

How do people live? The body aches from standing and it aches equally from sitting, so after work I have gone to yoga class and the instructor's voice has said jump back and put your butt up in the air, and I have done it, and I have done a push-up and put my butt up in the air again. With my butt up in the air, I have meditated on how everything is an illusion and tried to learn to detach from my boredom with bending over, jumping back, and putting my butt up in the air, trying not to think about the possibility that one of yoga's most important historical functions has been to help people cope with a caste system cultivated by the Aryan invaders of India in 1500 BCE and institutionalized by the British invaders in the 19th and 20th centuries, a system organized by color like South Africa during apartheid, in which the lightness of your skin coincided with your class and thus the kind of labor you might do. To believe that because you were born dark-skinned and a servant you must remain a servant until your next reincarnation is perhaps easier when you have learned to endure repetitive compulsory movements, especially when the dominant movement is to prostrate yourself with your butt up in the air, while practicing detaching from your desires. I have tried not to think about the fact that more and more Americans are finding this practice incredibly helpful, if not necessary, to keep this whole thing going. If you're not the kind of man® who wants to wear leggings and put your butt up in the air to learn to relax about repetition, there are other ways to reenact the feeling of becoming a kind of butt-fucked puppet, mindlessly reaching for the same things over and over again, bending over and even finding a kind of mystery or mystification in the empty repetition of bending: cigarettes, video games, whiskey shots, elliptical trainers, internet porn and what's Franco doing, what's that super-giant shark doing, what's that kitten doing, what's hotforyrcock97 doing, but when you go back to work on Monday, all this does nothing to change your essential condition.

Bank-robbin', since I got your question I have been reading studies and economics papers and watching documentaries about labor economics until I want to weep. All of these things are very complicated and controversial. I should not try to sum up what small portion of the disagreements I understand, because this is an advice column, not a political economy column. But there is math that says that the best way to redistribute wealth and make working more fair would be to tax high income more, and other

math that says it would be better to tax wealth more and stop penalizing high earners, and other math that says we should bring back the practice of the “year of jubilee” and cancel all debt.⑨ There are those who think capitalism must end for any kind of real economic equality to be achieved, and there are those who think we should just try to get our oligarchy to actually function more like capitalism, that the profit motive is all that will ever work to better the world. The math I like best says it is within the realm of possibility, with a rearrangement of how taxes are collected and distributed, for every citizen to receive a basic income upon which to survive, which would not be tied to work.⑩ If this were to be implemented, you could choose not to participate in this construct and still eat. Imagine a world in which your choices about where and how to work were not determined in the context of white-hot rage or crippling fear over the inability to simply feed yourself. To forget how things *should be* is to treat the economy as more real than we are.

In the last few years, I’ve experienced the rare pleasure of good work, teaching freshman composition—a job that is usually contingent and undercompensated in universities but which I do for an institution that values it and compensates it fairly.⑪ And in the past month, I have experienced for the first time in my life an even rarer privilege: I’ve been writing fulltime, getting paid to do the job I want to do, and which I’ve done on the side, for free or nearly for free, some fifteen years. There is repetition and drudgery in these jobs, as in any other—more drafts to comment on, always another paragraph to wrangle from my confused brain—but to get to choose to do the work you want to do, and should do, and not to feel your labor is being exploited, I can now say, means *everything*. It is like living in a different world entirely. No, Bank- robbin’, there is nothing wrong with you. There was something wrong with me, all those years, for burying my anger; for not being able to imagine a different world. But I was too tired from working. And perhaps that is one of the worst things about shitty jobs: they make many too tired even to be angry, and too tired to imagine a world where more people could get to do the work they want to do and still eat.

But I think there is hope, and it comes from something we tend to do already while working shit jobs. When I worked as an air monitor for asbestos abatement, there was a month or so when my job was to measure the asbestos in the air on a demo site midway up a skyscraper,

where a crew of Polish men was ripping up old floor tiles. Every morning I would drag my air pumps on the subway to the skyscraper, inspect the white plastic decontamination chamber, set the air pumps running, and sit down to watch the men get ready for work. One by one, in their tighty-whiteys, the men passed through the decontamination chamber, put on their white paper suits, and took up their tools. They ripped into the floor with pickaxes. It was about 110 degrees. After an hour or so, they would begin to take turns resting. They pulled bottles of vodka out of their backpacks and passed them around. At this point it was like nine in the morning. All day, they took turns tearing into the floor and sitting together, talking, sitting with me. When they were not sitting with me, I read. When they sat with me, I asked them questions about Poland, where my grandfather was from, and told them stories from what I was reading; they told me about their children, and what they thought of the city, the way in which the US government functioned compared to what they’d left behind, the books they were reading, and always, alcoholism, and always, Poland. By noon, they were all wasted, and with each passing drink they became more meditative, more profound in their thoughts and stories. I do not mean to romanticize demo work, or my ancestral people, or alcoholism, but I will never forget their determination to remain alive and interested and social and good to one another, and good to me, in the midst of it.

If regular employment feels to you like the “most soul-oppressing thing [you] can imagine,” Bank-robbin’, then it must be that something in your soul is not made for such work. Perhaps there is a sensitivity in you to touch, to the quiet improvisations of everyday beauty. You are capable of living in any moment with a fullness everyone thinks they have lost, and to shut this down, to hide it for the sake of getting through even a day of exploited work, feels terrible. Your anger at this is a true response. If you cannot stomach doing what people tell you to do, while they grow wealthy and you more broke, then grow your anger until it is hotter than the sun. Know that you have chosen it—that you are choosing to stay awake, to look around, to see that everything is upside down, to remember what is lost in a day of selling your time for no good reason other than the survival that should be your right, and bring us along on your anger’s wide back, for so many of us have given up. But Bank-robbin’, I think this is very important for you: do not let your anger hide from you the truth that you are not alone in this. Do not miss

out on the grace of solidarity, the pleasure of empathetic turn-taking when the work is hard, and the relentless determination to make even shitty work meaningful, that the Polish crew showed me. We must extend this solidarity far beyond the bounds of our individual workplaces, if we're going to change this whole situation; we can't let anger keep us from this.

Where should you direct your rage, then? To what end? This is a difficult question. Too often I see people directing their rage against the wealthy, as if they are monsters. To treat the "1 percent" as some abstract malevolent conspiracy is to tread too close to the helplessness that is really what keeps the whole thing going. Sure, there are people whose greed and desire to exploit others are the very reason we have the word *evil*. Sure, for some reason some bosses are totally manipulative and sadistic. But I suspect that for most of the members of the upper 10 percent, and even the 1 percent, the real story is different—it is the system that is exploitative, and they have chosen to fight for a position in that system that is the only way to have a kind of personal power that should be everyone's right. Do you think that if they weren't so scared of falling into our position, so many people would choose to work in finance, for example, an industry built, in large part, on preying on the debt of others? Employment in that sector is currently the one of the best bets for ensuring one's basic needs are met, and sending one's children to college, if they want to go, and getting to live where you most want to live, and traveling to other countries, and getting good health care, without going into debt. It's not bad to want these things; it's just that everyone should have them. I wonder sometimes who we have lost to employment in the finance industry—how many great, world-changing climatologists and astrophysicists and doctors and molecular biologists and teachers and composers and househusbands and architects and urban planners. We'll never know, so long as it is the most lucrative employment for people who are really good at math. How many world-changing social justice lawyers have we lost to corporate law? We'll never know. If it is the economy that is unreal, not those who run it—if the rich and the bosses and the managers are human beings who inevitably care for other beings, and who would *rather* care for other beings than exploit them—then change is possible. Better to direct your white-hot festering rage not toward scapegoating the 1 percent, and staying helpless, but toward finding the best way to describe this again and again,

more persuasively, more beautifully, in whatever art or political action or writing or talking you have a gift for—what shitty work is really like, what debt is like, what selling our lives to an unreal and exploitative economy is like—in order to build that solidarity broader than our individual workplaces.

And "Bank-robbin'," despite your clever disguise, there is no mistaking the syntax of your sentences, and I can think of no one else but you who would dare call me "Miss." If you are who I know you are, you are not built to sell yourself in mindless repetition. There is repetition in you, but it is the repetition of music, of which you are made. Movement because of feeling, because of sound, or whatever vibrates between people, in language and beyond language. Come home. I can think of several pleasurable ways you might take this anger out on me. Afterwards I'll find the place just under your left shoulder blade where it gathers, and I will direct at this place all my theories of amateur massage. Or do whatever you like, go where you like; lie in stunned silence until your next shift, if you need to; I will not join those who all day long tell you what to do. But I wish that tonight, at least, you would be my anger, and I could be your peace. That we could practice this together with and for the sake of all our friends, for everyone, to learn to be different than what we are, alone: to be responsible enough not to be lonely about labor, self-defeated in anger, nihilistic in resignation, but rather to be one another's anger, and one another's peace. I do not yet know the best way to rob the banks so that more can live well, but I am working on it, and many are working on it. I suspect that it must begin like this: we stop robbing ourselves of life, for them.

Yours, The Professor

1. See Gallup's latest "State of the American Workplace" study, which describes this widespread misery about work: <http://www.gallup.com/strategicconsulting/163007/state-american-workplace.aspx>. 80 percent of those in the labor force in the United States are employed in service industries, where many jobs are understood to be worthless by those who hold them. The anthropologist David Graeber has called this kind of work "bullshit labor": "[h]uge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul. Yet virtually no one talks about it." (<http://libcom.org/library/phenomenon-bullshit-jobs-david-graeber>). And of course, our working conditions are considerably better than those of millions of even more exploited laborers globally who produce the products we consume. ↩
2. http://mhmusa.org/uploads/2/8/7/5/2875366/2014a_krueger.pdf ↩
3. <http://nypost.com/2014/04/23/rising-rents-in-nyc-top-those-in-the-rest-of-the-nation-while-incomes-fail-to-keep-up/> ↩
4. See the latest census: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/36047.html> ↩
5. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). ↩
6. Many do give up, drop out, find some way to stop working. Those who give up, called "discouraged workers," aren't even counted in the unemployment statistics we read in the papers. ↩
7. The average college student now graduates with \$30,000 in debt: <http://projectonstudentdebt.org/files/pub/classof2012.pdf>. ↩
8. I'm assuming you are a man because of the "Miss," or that you're from the South, or both. ↩
9. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), and the controversy following, in the *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and everywhere. Also: David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011). ↩
10. *Basic Income: The Movie*. It's on YouTube. ↩
11. For example, when I started, while in grad school at NYU, we were paid \$9,600 a year for teaching full time, such that any of us who weren't from wealthy families had to work a couple of other jobs on the side of our full-time job while we went to school full time. These conditions changed when we threatened to unionize. ↩