Follow Your Bliss!
Follow Your Bliss!

a practical, soul-centered guide to job-hunting and career-life planning

by

Helen Nienhaus Barba
For Mom and Dad
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FOREWORD
Creating with the Workplace
by
Shaun McNiff

Experience teaches that the great frontiers for the creative process are places where it is least recognized. Today the workplace is that unexplored region of creative discovery and practice. Both leaders and workers know that something has to change.

There is a great reservoir of creative potential that needs to be released, but we have yet to find the way. Well intentioned efforts to introduce the creative imagination into the workplace tend to be characterized by superficial outcomes such as short-lived trends of poets reading to corporate boards who feel the need for something outside the lines of work as usual. In an effort to inspire and retain talented employees, creativity consultants redesign work environments and make them more spacious, illuminated by natural light, and open to the natural world. All of these efforts are important steps toward a deeper experience of reality, but the technician mentality that drives the workplace today is simply incapable of contacting the undiscovered resources of the creative imagination that lie waiting in individuals, groups, and places.

As I was preparing a lecture on “creativity and workplace,” my fourteen year old daughter said, “Daddy, those are two words that people don’t usually connect to one another.” My daughter is absolutely correct. Creativity is something we do, if we have the time, outside work. We imagine retirement as a period when we can finally focus on what we really want to do with
our lives, and then discover that we miss the connections
to people, situations, and problems that provide the
interactive fuels of creation. The creative imagination is
an intelligence that operates outside the lines, and the
workplace is the ultimate arena for linear thought and
action.

During the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries English
and German thinkers defined the imagination as an
intermediate realm that integrates rational, intuitive, and
sensory knowing. The creative imagination draws together
the resources of a person's different faculties and generates
new things based on a transformative mix of often
unlikely elements. Everything from experience, good and
bad, contributes to the outcomes that lie outside the
parameters of linear cause and effect. Imagination makes
leaps into new ways of perceiving and engaging the world
that can be likened to the discoveries of late 20th century
physics.

The workplace of today has not been significantly
influenced by the discoveries of the new physics. It is a
realm shaped largely by the old linear science and
industries that never adopted the pre-industrial visions of
creative imagination. For two centuries the science of
work has stayed strictly within the lines. Imagination is
commonly defined as unreality, and imaginative people
are viewed as escaping from the real world.

We all need our retreats from the world of work to
regenerate and refocus our creative energies. There are
many pathogens in the workplace in terms of stress, fear,
and monotony. My experience constantly indicates that
the things that oppress us the most carry the seeds of
major transformations of consciousness. I realize that I
need the community of people within the workplace and
our collaborative efforts toward shared goals to keep me connected to the real stuff of life. I create together with the world and not completely apart from it. Work and daily life offer the “stuff” of creative imagination and especially the irritants and problems that push the creative process into new frontiers of engagement.

As the human resource director at my workplace said to me, “Creativity is very hard to cultivate in the workplace and very easy to destroy.” She went on to describe how fear is the primary threat to creative expression at work. What happens if I take a risk and it goes against the grain of workplace values? What will I do if I lose this job?

Creative imagination requires us to place things in new relationships and to go beyond the boundaries of how things are presently done, whereas the workplace typically requires the opposite from people. How can these contradictions be addressed? Is there hope for the practice of creative imagination in the workplace? Even though it may be widely recognized that creativity is good for the workplace, that it fosters greater productivity and invention, helps people to feel better about themselves and their jobs, and thoroughly energizes environments, it may be viewed as counter-culture, threatening the command and control systems that drive contemporary business. Companies and organizations are simply not set-up to deliver the creative process. Too much creativity can actually get you into trouble within environments where you are expected to stay completely within the lines and meet standardized expectations.

There are many aspects of work that require strict adherence to rules and regulations and linear problem solving. The practice of imagination in the workplace
must ultimately work together with boundaries and concrete expectations. It is not a matter of embracing one without the other. Experience indicates that restrictions can often feed creation so long as there is a receptivity to divergent possibilities and new discoveries. Leadership needs to model respect for new ideas and make it safe for people to experiment and try something different.

Paradigm inconsistencies can evaporate immediately when we discover that something new works and offers great value. Therefore the contradictions between imaginative and linear thinking are not insurmountable. I believe the ongoing separation between creativity and work results from a comprehensive inability to grasp what can be done differently. Simply stated, we know that the practice of creation can be good for the workplace, but we don't know how to do it. Superficial gimmicks will do more to undermine the practice of imagination and keep it outside organizational life.

I believe that it will be the efforts of inspired individuals that will bring about the integration of work and creative imagination. People guided by visions can change anything. As increasing numbers of people begin to share the same vision and work toward it together, it becomes a consensually validated reality. The primary force for change in the workplace will be the consciousness of workers who feel that something very important is lacking in their lives.

We typically say that the infusion of imagination into the workplace depends upon visionary leaders who establish and hold the space for others to create. The role of leadership is crucial, but I believe that sweeping changes in organization life are more apt to occur through a rising tide of worker aspirations. When these positive shifts in
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consciousness occur, leadership manifests a responsive intelligence that helps the innovations take root and grow.

Helen Nienhaus Barba's book is one of these inspired and important individual contributions to a larger change in consciousness. The author knows that something is missing in the world and she has taken action to doing something different. Her book is based upon Joseph Campbell's exhortation to “follow your bliss.” As John Lennon said, “imagine all the people,” following their instincts about how to create a better and more complete life. I also have no doubt that a more blissful experience at work will be more productive and good for the bottom line, but we still don't know how to go about doing this.

Barba offers many practical steps toward realizing a more productive and creative relationship with work. This book reads both like a challenge and a common sense course of action:

- Stretch the imagination and watch how it changes the realities that appear beyond our control.
- There is a power in the practice of imagination that has yet to be tapped.
- Everything depends upon how we think about things.
- Pay attention to the things that bother you and actually “indulge” them, Barba says. See your problems as doorways to change. They are telling you what needs attention.
- Work can be a labor of the heart, the author says, and this power can be channeled in new ways.
In addition to giving a big picture of a new relationship to work, Barba offers many practical tips on resume writing, job counseling, goal setting, prioritizing, and so forth. Ultimately it is the sustained application of the creative imagination to these ordinary things that really changes the world. The realization of a more creatively fulfilling workplace is based upon what Barba calls “intuitions of the future” and new possibilities of what we can do within organizational life.

Helen Nienhaus Barba is making her individual contribution to the rising tide of creativity in the workplace. Read this book and discover what you can do. Following your bliss is often difficult. Setbacks and disappointments are inevitably on the way to creating something new. The sense of bliss is the vision, the guide, and the affirmation that something different is possible. It is not just momentary pleasure. Bliss can be a beautiful idea of what can someday exist. Trust your “intuitions of the future” and be assured that the creative process can ultimately deliver you to a new place.

This book’s focus on the workplace challenges us all to work together to revision and recreate the place that binds us all.
I’ll do anything. I don’t care about a career.
I just need a job.
-- Anonymous

Life is too short to be spent at a job that holds no personal value -- or, in the worst case scenario, at a job that evokes apathy, misery or contempt. And yet, many of us feel painfully insecure about our abilities to find meaning and satisfaction in work.

On the other hand, there is Joe the Conductor. In workshops I held in Massachusetts I often spoke about Joe. I never knew his real name, but I knew his presence well. He rode the commuter rail between Boston and Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and he lived and breathed his job so naturally, and with such pride, that it was nearly impossible to imagine him in any other role. I could tell by the proud way he sauntered through the aisles and bellowed out his stops that he loved his job. The most amazing thing was that the moment I began to describe Joe during my workshops, at least one or two people in the room who had ridden the rail knew exactly whom I meant.

Joe the Conductor was one of those fortunate individuals who had found a way to “follow his Bliss,” to borrow a phrase from the late Joseph Campbell. I have grown fond of the term “Bliss.” Webster defines Bliss as “perfect happiness” and “heavenly joy,” which implies a spiritual connection. The word is originally derived from the Greek word bhlei, meaning “to shine.” For me, Bliss arrives in grace-filled moments when I am me most completely: when I lose track of time in the midst of a
creative endeavor, when a tragedy calls forth strengths I didn’t know I had, when a stunning sunset prompts me to pause and consider my place in the universe. Bliss even accompanies rare moments when I let down my guard and face my inadequacies.

In the pages to follow I hope to make the path to Bliss accessible to you, and to advance the notions that:

(1) like everyone, you deserve more than a “just a job”; you deserve Bliss.

(2) you have the potential to achieve Bliss.

(3) you have an obligation to make use of the gifts and talents which uniquely equip you for work that nurtures the soul, and incidentally leads to Bliss.

It’s easy to acknowledge that everyone deserves joy and satisfaction in his or her work. Still, many behave as if they don’t deserve it. The phenomenon seems to have sprouted in part from puritanical roots which framed work as drudgery to be performed with perseverance and humility, but not necessarily with enjoyment, nor (heaven forbid) with passion.

The attitude is reflected in the way we use language to describe work. We make clear distinctions between “work” and “play.” And those who dare to admit, “I love this job -- I can’t believe they pay me to do this!” can meet with disapproval, envy, or derision. Some even feel inclined to apologize for enjoying their work.

When people view joy and passion in work as a luxury – or, worse yet, as mutually exclusive terms -- it is not surprising that they approach the job search with low
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expectations. Paradoxically, this positioning actually works against the job seeker. Rather than facing greater numbers of opportunities -- which some assume an I’ll-take-anything approach will yield -- we more often find ourselves immobilized, without direction, and unable to inspire the involvement and help of others. Success, as it turns out, characteristically eludes those who lack the focus and direction which a follow-your-Bliss posture can provide.

Follow Your Bliss! supports the search for purposeful, meaningful, satisfying work with a series of exercises and words of inspiration. It is best studied and worked on within a small group, or at least with a partner. I have found that dialog between people inspires imagination and makes the work richer. The ideal arrangement, in my view, is for individuals and groups to work in partnership with an expressive therapist -- a masters level clinician/psychotherapist with special training in the use and interpretation of artistic as well as verbal expressions.*

Most of all, the quest requires generous measures of imagination and courage. Each of these qualities deserves further mention here.

The Power of Imagination

Let me begin by sharing a basic, governing principle:

The way we imagine ourselves has far more power in our lives than the way we literally are.

*To learn more about expressive therapy, contact the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) at P.O. Box 641246, San Francisco, California 94164-1246.
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It is the way we imagine ourselves -- not any fantasy we have about an “objective” or literal reality -- that plays the dominant role in dictating how we behave. The eating disorder anorexia nervosa provides a striking and sobering example. Our vision of a beautiful, young woman literally wasting away by deliberately starving herself simply does not match the girl’s own vision of a grossly overweight person. For her, refusing to eat is not so simple as a cry for attention; it actually arises from an altered way of imagining reality. The girl behaves in full accordance with her perceived reality.

Another example more relevant to the career search can be found in a story from writer and philosopher Sam Keen. In an interview with Bill Moyers (Sam Keen: Your Mythic Journey, 1991), Dr. Keen told of his high achiever brother who had developed a reputation in the family for superior mechanical ability. Young Sam saw himself in comparison as someone who could never quite measure up. As an adult, he took an achievement test in the hopes of getting guidance in choosing a job. When the counselor presented him with the results, he was not surprised to hear that his scores fell “in the fifth percentile.” “That sounds about right,” Sam conceded. “Ninety-five percent of the people tested scored better than I did.” “No, no,” replied the counselor. “You’re in the top five percent. Ninety-five percent scored below you.” Sam answered, “No -- that’s my brother.” From an early age, he had imagined that he lacked mechanical ability, and this imagination strongly influenced his behavior.

The power of imagination, though it can present obstacles, is a great gift. The implication is that if you give yourself permission to imagine yourself doing what you
love most, doing it well and enjoying success, you come that much closer to actually being there. This is no trick. It is a legitimate tool for accessing a realm far more powerful and just as real as our literal reality. There are those who insist that they have killed cancers by imagining them gone -- not as a fleeting imagining, but repeatedly, with faith and with great detail (Siegel, 1986). How much more difficult can it be to land a job for which you are uniquely suited?

On the other hand, if you imagine that you have no hope of ever finding happiness in a job, guess what? This becomes your reality. There is no hope, not because of any literal reality, but because of how you imagine your reality. If you imagine hopelessness, how can you put more than a half-hearted effort into a job search? By the same token, what employer will want to hire someone with a hopeless attitude?

The phenomenon of the power of imagination holds true not only for individuals, but also for the collective awareness of our culture. As a case in point, consumer confidence has a huge impact on our economy, and it is as simple as this: When we have confidence, we spend. When we spend, we feed the economy. And when we feed the economy, it grows. A “weak” economy can only be aided when consumer confidence is high and leads to increased spending. On the other hand, no amount of wealth stashed away will help an economy when its keeper lacks confidence in his employability and/or in the capacity of the economy to meet his need for meaningful employment.

Several years ago, we were all bathed in a nationwide sense of hopelessness and doom. The economy was “bad.” This is was the social reality we imagined for
ourselves. In a period of time when the economy is characterized as “bad,” the psychological impact can be broad and exaggerated. We often imagine things to be worse than they are. The psychological impact is loss of hope, and it dictates our behavior and hurts us more than any literal reality can.

What’s more, hopelessness can prevent us from hearing the good news. And there has been good news, even during our bleakest periods. In the midst of our “bad economy,” between 1970 and 1980, for example, the number of available jobs in the United States actually rose by over twenty million, and in 1986 we added another ten million (Wegmann et. al., 1989, p. 7). Unemployment ran high for a time only because of an increase in people seeking work, most notably a flood of baby boomers, immigrants, and women. This sudden, uneven growth put the mix of jobs in flux. As the economy grew stronger, the unemployment rate continued to decline.

Sadly, many people have failed to adjust their expectations even with improving economic conditions. This is understandable in part because of the difficulty in comprehending and adapting to monumental changes in the nature of work and the workforce. But before I address these changes -- a word about courage.
As the reader can well imagine by now, a fertile and active imagination cannot propel a person on the path to soul-nurturing work without a generous measure of courage. There are certain to be obstacles on this path, moments of doubt, and fear.

For the most part, fear cannot be avoided. Courage has been defined as the ability to *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* (Jeffers, 1987). Courage means stretching past the safe boundaries of a daily routine and rising to meet the challenges that call you. This can be mighty scary. But as the saying goes, if you’re never scared, then you can never know true courage.

Many need help to muster the courage and confidence required to manage and thrive within the new economy and to follow Bliss. Sometimes the first step may be to muster the courage to ask for help -- from a career counselor, therapist, professional resumé writer, or even from a friend. But taking this first step is only the beginning, for fear has the tendency to return to haunt us. I’ll come back to this point in greater depth in Step Five, found in the latter part of the book.

For now, in order to thrive in a changing economy and world, we must “reimagine the game” and our role in it.