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It's all in a day's work

Cordelia Fine

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For some people, a career is a labour of love; for others, a laborious life sentence. So do we all find our calling?

THERE is something truly extraordinary about the passion some academics feel for their research. For example, the fish ear bone - or otolith, to give it its technical title - is not a topic to arouse fervour in many (beyond a mild surprise that fish have ears). Yet a research biologist I know has suffered innumerable horrors - including three days in high summer squatting ankle-deep in dead, rotting fish, a clothes peg fastened to her nose - all to unlock the golden mysteries of river life that careful study of the fish ear promises to unveil.

She has spent hours with her arms in sinks filled with fish (once, memorably, my sink) yet has never once, so far as I know, asked herself, "Just what is it, anyway, that's so special about the otolith?". When she talks about her research, the eagerness in her voice - like a person freshly in love - tells of a deep pity for those whose daily lives do not include fish ears.

How can these curious commitments to obscure areas of expertise be explained?

It helps, of course, that the academic is surrounded by like-minded people. If your colleagues all hurry to secure good seats at a seminar on the role of the semi-quaver in Celtic lullabies of the 18th century, then the Celtic 18th-century semi-quaver will take on a certain importance in your eyes. (This powerful phenomenon is known as "social proof".)

Strangely enough, the hand-to-mouth funding, onerous conditions and modest rates of pay in academe may also enhance its value in the eyes of those who practise it. According to the self-perception theory, we have no privileged insights into the reasons behind why we behave as we do. Instead, we have to infer our motives from the evidence around us.

According to this hypothesis, the academic surveys the crumbling plaster of the office walls, the credit column of the payslip, or the stinking piles of dead fish underfoot, and thinks, "Gosh, I must really love my work."

Yet there is also, it turns out, something special about the way the truly impassioned academic perceives their work. From interviews with those from a wide range of occupations, psychologist Amy Wrzesniewski has found that people fall neatly into three categories.

For the "job oriented", work is simply a means to earn money which they can then spend doing things they actually enjoy.

Those with a "career orientation" enjoy work, but are motivated by the prestige, status and financial rewards brought by career success. Take away those trappings, and there is little left to drive them.

But for the "calling oriented", work is not really even work, but an intensely satisfying and worthy end in itself. For those with a calling, fish ears represent not a dollar earned, nor an article published, but a source of fascinating and valuable insights.

Certain occupations "call louder" than others, and academe is no doubt well suited to a calling orientation. Yet what is most interesting about Wrzesniewski's research is that the

same occupation can be a job to one person, but a calling to another. To a hospital cleaner, a ward can represent just another dirty floor to be mopped, or the means by which he contributes to the important process of making sick people well again. Some fortunate people may simply be gifted with an inclination to see purpose and find fulfilment in the work they do.

Nonetheless, it can still be hard to fathom how a person could be enthralled by fish ear bones. In his book *Conditions of Love*, philosopher John Armstrong suggests that our capacity for "imaginative attention" draws us to certain people whose understated qualities somehow match our own characters. "Someone who seems just moderately nice - to most people - can flower under the imaginative attention of a lover's eye. The kind of attention the lover brings allows less obvious qualities to be seen and appreciated." Perhaps something similar occurs when someone finds their calling.

Here, then, is the most inspiring explanation of all for the peculiar devotions played out in the groves of academe. In the eyes of the right biologist, the humble and ugly fish ear is worthy of love.

Cordelia Fine is a research fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University, and the author of *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives* (Allen & Unwin).

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