

## CHAPTER 18

### Reconnection Three: To Meaningful Work

Whenever I became optimistic about the chances of this reconnection spreading beyond isolated points of light like Kotti in Berlin or the Bromley-by-Bow clinic in East London, I came back to a huge obstacle, and for a long time I couldn't see how we get beyond it. We spend most of our waking lives working—and 87 percent of us feel either disengaged or enraged by our jobs. You are twice as likely to hate your job as love it, and once you factor in e-mails, those work hours are spreading over more and more of our lives—fifty, sixty hours a week. This isn't a molehill. It's the mountain at the center of almost all our lives. This is where our time goes, and our lives go.

So yes, you can tell people to try alternatives—to reach out—but when, exactly, are they meant to do it? In the four hours when they collapse onto the sofa and try to engage with their kids before they clamber into bed before it starts all over again?

But that's not the obstacle I was thinking of. The obstacle is that meaningless work has to be done. It's not like some of the other causes of depression and anxiety I've been talking about, like childhood trauma, or extreme materialism, which are unnecessary malfunctions in the wider system. Work is essential. I thought about the jobs all my relatives have done. My maternal grandmother cleaned toilets; my maternal grandfather worked on the docks; my paternal grandparents were farmers; my dad was a bus driver; my mother worked in a shelter for victims of domestic violence; my sister is a nurse; my brother orders stock for a supermarket. All of these jobs are necessary. If they stopped being done, then key parts of our society would cease to function. And if that work—being bossed around, being made to do it, being disciplined by the market into doing stuff that's tedious but necessary—is essential, then even if it causes depression and anxiety, it must continue. It felt like a necessary trap.

On an individual level, a few of us might escape. If you can move to a job where you are controlled less, and have more autonomy, or are doing something you believe matters—do it. Your anxiety and depression levels will likely dip. But in a landscape where only 13 percent of people have jobs they find meaningful, that advice seems almost cruel. Most of us aren't—in this environment, as it stands today—going to get to work that we find personally meaningful. As I type this, I am picturing one person I know and love, who is a single mother, working a low-paid job she hates in order to keep her three kids in their apartment. Telling her she needs a more fulfilling job when she's battling to keep a job at all would be both mean, and meaningless.

I began to think about this obstacle differently—and to see a way beyond it—only when I went to a rather prosaic place. It is a small store in Baltimore that sells and repairs bikes. They told me a story. And that story opened me up to a much wider debate, and to the evidence that suggests we can infuse our work with greater meaning and make it radically less depressing—not just for a few privileged individuals, but for the whole society.



The day that Meredith Mitchell handed in her resignation, she wondered if she was doing something crazy. She worked at the fundraising arm of a not-for-profit campaign group in Maryland. It was a typical office job: she was given assignments with a deadline, and her role was to keep her head down and do what she was told. Sometimes she would have ideas about how they could do things better. If she tried to put them forward, she was told to get on with what she'd been assigned. She had a boss who seemed like a nice person, but she was volatile, and Meredith never really knew how to read her moods. Meredith knew that in the abstract her work was probably doing some good, but she never felt any connection to it. It felt like a karaoke life—her job was to sing along to a song sheet written by somebody else. It wasn't a life where she would ever get to write her own song. At the age of twenty-four, she could see this stretching out before her for the next forty years.

Around this time, Meredith started to feel a pervasive sense of anxiety she couldn't quite understand. On Sunday nights, she'd feel her heart pounding in her chest, and a sense of dread about the week to come. Before long, she found she couldn't sleep during the week, either. She kept waking up feeling crippling nervous, but she didn't know why.

Yet when she told her boss she was quitting, she wasn't at all sure she was doing the right thing. She had grown up in a politically conservative family, and what she was about to embark on seemed radical, and strange, to them—and, if she was honest, to herself.

Meredith's husband, Josh, had a plan. He had started working in bike stores when he was sixteen years old, and he'd been riding bikes as a hobby for years before that: he loved the 20-inch trick bikes, on which you could whirr around the city and carry out stunts off the sides of sloped buildings. But working in bike stores, he learned, is a really hard way to make a living. It's low-wage work. You don't get a job contract, or sick pay, or vacations. It can be monotonous at times. And you're pervasively insecure. You can't plan for anything, and there's no path up—you're basically stuck on the bottom rung. If you ever wanted a raise, or a day off, or to stay home when you were ill, you had to beg the boss.

Josh had been working for a few years in a typical bike store in the city. The owner wasn't, on a personal level, a bad guy, but life working in his bike store was—for all these reasons—pretty miserable. You could bear it as a teenager, but as you got into your twenties and started to think about the future, you found there was just a big hole ahead of you.

At first, Josh's solution was to try something that has largely faded from life in the United States. He approached his colleagues—there were ten people working in the store—and asked them if they would consider, together, setting up a labor union, to formally demand better conditions. It took

better. They wanted written contracts. They wanted pay raises for two of the workers, to bring them up to the level of everyone else. And they wanted annual meetings to discuss salaries. It wasn't much, but it would, they felt, make them less anxious, and more secure.

But the list of demands was—in truth—more than that. It was a way of saying—we're not just cogs in a machine, like the screws we put into the bikes when we fix them. We're people, with needs. We're partners, and we deserve respect. He didn't quite think of it this way then, but it was about restoring dignity, Josh told me later, to working-class people who were being told that they were, basically, not worth much, and could be tossed aside at any time. Josh felt they were in a strong position, though, because he knew the business couldn't function without them.

When he was presented with the demands, Josh's boss looked really surprised, but he said he'd think about it. A few days later, he employed a tough labor-busting lawyer, and a long process of trying to deny them the right to organize began. It dragged on for months, and the whole U.S. legal system is designed to make it hard to organize a union and easy to break one up. The workers couldn't afford any kind of lawyer. His boss started to bring in new workers to undermine the unionized ones. Josh knew that, technically, it would be illegal for his boss to fire him or the other workers—but both sides knew the workers couldn't afford a long legal fight to assert that right.

That's when Josh had an idea. He knew how bike shops were run. The workers knew how it operated—because they literally did almost all the work. He thought—we could do this. We could run a store like this, ourselves, without the boss. If this was a conventional American story, Josh would now break away and set up his own business and rise to become the Jeff Bezos of bikes (or at least end up owning his own beach house on the Jersey Shore). But Josh didn't want to become the guy who orders everyone else around. In his years working in bike shops, he had noticed some things. The boss is isolated. Even when he's a nice guy, he's pushed into this weird position, controlling other people, which makes it hard for him to connect in ordinary ways. And this system—of having one guy at the top, giving orders—seemed to Josh to be quite inefficient. The guys working on the shop floor had loads of good ideas about how to make the business better. They could see things the boss couldn't see. But it made no difference. Their thoughts were irrelevant. And that actually harmed, Josh suspected, the business itself.

No—what Josh wanted was to be part of a business that ran on a different American ideal: democracy. He read up on the history of something called cooperatives. It turns out the way of working that we all take for granted now—a corporation that's run like an army, with one person at the top giving orders to the troops below, who have no say—is actually quite recent. It was only in the late nineteenth century that it became standard for human beings to work this way. When the boss-run corporation first started to take over, it was resisted intensely. Lots of people pointed out that it would create a system of “wage slavery” in which people would be controlled all the time and would end up feeling miserable. Some of them, Josh learned, had proposed organizing our work on totally different principles. They were called democratic cooperatives—and Josh learned that some had been really successful.

So Josh talked with some of his close friends, people he had worked alongside for a long time, and

with his wife, Meredith, about an idea. Let's run our own bike store, and do it as a cooperative. That means we'll share the work, and we'll share the profits. We'll make the decisions democratically. We won't have a boss—because we'll all be the boss. We're going to work hard—but we'll work differently. And it might just make us feel better. Meredith thought it sounded appealing—but as she quit her old job, she kept wondering: Was it realistic? How would it work?



As I approached Baltimore Bicycle Works on its corner in the downtown of the city, it looked like any other bike store. On the ground floor, there are bright bikes and accessories all around, on a cement floor, and there's a cash register, where Meredith was working when I arrived. When she took me upstairs, I saw there was a row of bikes lifted up as if on pulleys, and guys were standing next to them, looking as though they were performing some kind of primitive surgery. The bikes were partly dismantled, and they were being altered with screwdrivers and some tool I'd never seen before. Images of George Clooney repairing somebody's heart on *ER* flickered through my mind.

Alex Ticu, a guy in his late twenties with a big bushy mustache, carried on working on the bike as he told me about his life before he became a partner there, when he worked for a catering firm. He would hear from his boss once every two weeks, and “it would be a phone call in the morning, of her either yelling at me, or expressing disappointment, and then a phone call at the end of the night either yelling or expressing disappointment ... But she had no idea what I was doing, so I never understood how she knew to be disappointed in me.” Like a lot of people in standard jobs, he says, “I would wake up stressed in the middle of the night. It was pretty bad. It was affecting everything.”

Here, he said, it works differently. At Baltimore Bicycle Works, they have a meeting every Thursday morning to discuss together the decisions they have to make as a business. They've divided the work of the business into seven different chunks—from marketing to servicing broken bikes—and everyone takes joint responsibility for at least two of them. If anyone has an idea for how to do something better, or to stop doing something that's failing, they can propose it at that meeting. If somebody seconds it, they discuss it as a group, and then they vote on it. So—for example—if somebody wants to start carrying a new brand of bicycles, that's the process they go through.

There are six full partners in the business, who all share the proceeds, and when I was there, there were also three apprentices who were spending a year as part of the process and—if everyone felt they were a good fit—would then become full partners. At the end of each year, everyone does an annual review on everyone else. The goal is for everyone to feel equally committed to the cooperative, and able to find a way to make the best contribution they possibly can to it.

It was a tough job to set up a new business, and Meredith explained to me that she was working ten hours a day, every day, for the first year. She had more responsibility in this job than in her old one. But Meredith noticed something surprising. After she'd been there a short time, that heart-thumping, wake-in-the-night anxiety went away, and it's never come back.

I asked her—why? She has some ideas, and they fit closely with what I'd learned about the science of depression and anxiety earlier. Every previous job she had was, she says, “an out-of-control



experience.” There, “it didn’t matter if you had a good idea—if that was outside of your job’s scope, nobody was really interested in it. You got into your position and you did that job, you waited in line, and you would get promoted maybe after five years, and you did that next job for like five more years.” But here, she says, her ideas—and everyone’s ideas—count. “I feel like it’s different because if I have a good idea or want to explore something further, I feel like I have the liberty and the freedom to do that, and to see these ideas come to fruition.” When she suggests a different publicity strategy, or figures out a mistake they’ve been making in fixing one particular kind of bike, or thinks of a whole new item to stock—it can happen, and she can see the results.

As I sat with Meredith and watched the bike repairs happening all around us, I remembered what I had learned from Michael Marmot, the social scientist who carried out the research into British civil servants that showed the ways in which our work can make us sick, physically or mentally. He had explained to me: It’s not the work itself that makes you sick. It’s three other things. It’s the feeling of being controlled—of being a meaningless cog in a system. It’s the feeling that no matter how hard you work, you’ll be treated just the same and nobody will notice—an imbalance, as he puts it, between efforts and rewards. And it’s the feeling of being low on the hierarchy—of being a low-status person who doesn’t matter compared to the Big Man in the corner office.

Everyone at Baltimore Bicycle Works said they were dramatically happier, less anxious, and less depressed than they had been working in the kind of top-down organizations that dominate our society.

But here’s the thing that most fascinated me—and showed me a way beyond the obstacle I thought was insurmountable. The actual day-to-day work, for most of the people here, hasn’t changed radically. The guys who fixed bikes before fix bikes now. The guys who did publicity before do publicity now. But changing the structure radically changed how they felt about the work itself. Josh, when I interviewed him on another day, told me why he thinks that is. “I can certainly see depression and anxiety being related to the fact that people feel really, really confused and helpless ... I think it’s hard for people to live in a society where you have got no control over anything ... You don’t control your economic life, from the standpoint that it’s precarious whether you’ve got work at all, and then if you do have a job, you walk into the place, spend forty, fifty, sixty, eighty hours a week in this place. You don’t have free speech. You don’t have any sort of voting.” Anxiety and depression seem to him, he says, “rational reactions to the situation, as opposed to some kind of biological break.”

This way of living and working is, he explains, an attempt to deal with that problem.<sup>4</sup> When you have no say over your work, it becomes dead and meaningless. But when you control it, you can begin to infuse it with meaning. It becomes yours. And if there’s something about the work that depresses you, you can argue for it to be broken up, or alternated with something more meaningful—and you have a good chance of being listened to.

This might sound like a pretentious way to describe a bike shop, but it seemed to me they had found a way of working that more closely resembled the participative tribes that human beings evolved to live in on the savannas of Africa millennia ago—one in which everyone is needed and everyone has a role that is meaningful to them. (It also has lots of advantages those early humans

didn’t have—no large animals are going to come into Baltimore Bicycle Works and eat them, and they are going to live well beyond their thirties.)

This way of working provides, it occurred to me, several forms of reconnection at the same time. You are reconnected to your work—because you feel you are choosing it, you can see the difference it makes, and you directly benefit from the work you do. You are reconnected to a sense of status—you aren’t humiliated by having anyone order you around or tell you what to do. And you are reconnected to the future—instead of knowing you could be fired at any moment, you know where you’ll be a year or five years from now, if you choose it and keep working hard.

Of course, they all told me, they still have bad days. They have days when they have to prod each other to do something; they have days when they don’t feel like being at work; there are aspects of the job that feel like a chore. One of the original partners explained that it felt like too much responsibility—to be partly in charge of the whole business—and went back to a more conventional office job. This isn’t a magical solution. But “when I started working here, I didn’t have trouble sleeping anymore,” Meredith says, and she’s echoed by several of her colleagues.

They also feel it’s more efficient—that they literally have a better bike shop. In the old system, you have one person’s brain on every problem, and he might listen to others if they’re lucky. Here, you have nine people’s brains on every problem.



At bars and parties, when Meredith tells people about this work, they’re often incredulous. “People are constantly amazed—[they] don’t understand how you could possibly run a business like this,” she explains. But she tells them—Everyone’s been in a group environment. Everyone’s been in a family, or on a team. You know how it works. “But all of a sudden, when you think about it in the context of making money or running a business, everyone’s head explodes about it. But I don’t feel like it’s that complicated. People want it to be a lot more complicated than it really is ... They can’t even imagine how people would work together to make simple decisions ... I like to explain that it’s a democratic organization. This isn’t a foreign concept. You live in America. We say we’re a democracy, but people are so far removed from the concept.”

Our politicians are constantly singing hymns to democracy as the best system—this is simply the extension of democracy to the place where we spend most of our time. Josh says it’s amazing victory for their propaganda system—to make you work in an environment you often can’t stand, and to do it for most of your waking life, and see the proceeds of your labor get siphoned off by somebody at the top, and then to make you “think of yourself as a free person.”

Those people at parties tell Meredith that without a boss, everyone would surely just sit around doing nothing. But, she explains, “the business is our livelihood, so if we all just sat around and did nothing, then it would be nothing and we would get nothing out of it.” But she thinks it goes deeper than that. From this experience, she has learned that “people want to work. Everybody wants to work. Everybody wants to feel useful, and have purpose.”<sup>5</sup> The humiliation and control of so many workplaces can suppress that, or drive it out of people, but it’s always there, and it reemerges in the

right environment. People “want to feel like they’ve had an impact on other humans—that they’ve improved the world in some way.”

In fact, there’s good evidence that this increases effectiveness in the long term. A major study by scientists at Cornell University investigated 320 small businesses. Half had top-down control, and half let the workers set their own agenda in a model that was closer to the democratic system at Baltimore Bicycle Works. The businesses closer to the democratic model grew, on average, four times more than the others.<sup>4</sup> Why? Alex Ticu, who was still performing surgery on a bike, told me that here, for the first time, “I feel proud of the work I do.” Another one of the bike mechanics, Scott Myers, told me: “It definitely feels very rewarding when you show up and see the building and don’t think of it as the place where you come in to put your hours, but as the thing you’ve contributed to making.”

Sometimes, Meredith says as we look out over the floor of bikes, she feels that “we’re on the beginning of a cultural change.” Why would anyone work in the old way, the people at Baltimore Bicycle Works wonder, when they can take back control of their work and make it meaningful again?



I learned there are tens of thousands of democratic workplaces like Baltimore Bicycle Works, all over the world. Several distinguished social scientists have tried to get grants to study what happens to your mental health in democratic workplaces, and they have all been turned down, so we don’t have much data. But there is a large amount of evidence—as I discussed before<sup>2</sup>—that feeling controlled and ordered around at work, and feeling you’re at the bottom of a hierarchy, makes you more depressed, and more anxious. It seems fair, then, to assume that a spread of cooperatives would have an antidepressant effect—although this is something that needs to be studied a whole lot more.

I realized that this recipe for mental health could be distilled down to the three words that everyone in our culture instinctively understands: Elect Your Boss. Work wouldn’t be an ordeal that’s done to you, something to endure. It’d be a democratic tribe that you are part of, and that you control as much as anyone else. One of the most popular political slogans of the past few years has been “Take Back Control.” People are right to connect with this slogan—they have lost control, and they long to regain it—but that slogan has been used by political forces, like those backing Brexit or Donald Trump, that will give them even less control. This, I came to think, is a way to reclaim that slogan, and help people to gain what they are rightly hungering for.



Before I left her for the last time, Meredith told me that she believes this longing for meaningful work—to have a say over what you spend most of your life doing—is there, just below the surface, in everyone. “Happiness is really feeling like you’ve impacted another human positively. I think a lot of people want their work to be like that,” she said. And she looked around the workplace she built and controls with her colleagues, then she looked back at me and said: “You know?”