

Good Work in Turbulent Times

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Hardly a week passes without a major news story about a professional whose behavior is questionable: a scientist whose work on toxicity is generously supported by tobacco companies; a judge who has met secretly with one of the parties in a dispute; a physician who has accepted lavish gifts from a drug company; a journalist who blurs the line between reportage and fiction; an teacher who invents chapters of his life. These stories warrant attention because they clash with our notion of how a professional should act. Over and above adherence to the law, we expect professionals to set an ethical standard and to carry out good work--work that is both excellent in quality and beyond ethical reproach.

Over the last six years, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, William Damon, and I have led a team of social scientists engaged in a study of good work in various professions. We have probed whether individuals desire to carry out good work, the obstacles that they encounter, the strategies that they have devised, their dreams and nightmares about their chosen line of work. As researchers we ask whether professionals can pass the "mirror test"--whether they can look at themselves in the mirror and feel proud of the work that they and their fellow professionals do. We have found that good work is especially difficult to carry out in certain professions at this historical moment when society is changing quickly, market forces are very powerful, and our very sense of time and space

is being altered by technology. And yet even under trying circumstances, there are always individuals who carry out good work and who find such work thrilling and rewarding.

Most of us can think of individuals who are exemplary good workers. Among my own candidates are broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, tennis star Arthur Ashe, one-time Attorney General Edward Levi, ecological writer Rachel Carson, medical researcher Jonas Salk, publisher Katharine Graham, and--to choose two living examples--political leader Nelson Mandela, and public servant John W. Gardner (no relation). No need to claim that these individuals are without flaws. Yet their professional lives were characterized by a strong sense of the mission of their profession, a refusal to be tempted by fame and fortune if this leads them away from their goals, and a continuing concern about how best to realize that mission in fast-changing times.

In the first phase of our study, the Good Work research team examined two contrasting professions that exert tremendous power over our minds and our bodies—journalism and genetics. Journalists tell us what is happening in the world; they stock our minds with the information--the "memes", as Richard Dawkins terms units of content--that is important for our daily lives. Geneticists explain in detail what is happening in our bodies. They identify the contributions of heredity and the precise genetic bases of many diseases. In the new millennium, findings about our "genes" will figure crucially in the kinds of treatments, therapies, and even offspring that people will have. We conducted in-depth

interviews with over 100 journalists and 100 geneticists, most of them leaders of the field today.

Genetics and journalism emerge as strikingly different. Geneticists love what they are doing; they cannot wait to get up in the morning; and they describe the future of their chosen calling in glowing terms. In sharp contrast, most journalists are depressed or frustrated by their profession. They would like to be able to cover and report stories that they deem important and to do so carefully and objectively. Instead, they encounter tremendous pressures to cover sensational stories and to sensationalize them further; to cut corners in their research; to avoid investigative work that is expensive, time-consuming, may yield little, or--worst of all--may undermine financial interests of the conglomerate that owns the newspaper or television station. Former newspaper editor Harold Evans describes the dilemma faced by many journalists: "The problem many organizations face is not to stay in business, it is to stay in journalism."

Genetics and Journalism are not inherently good or bad professions. Rather, the conditions under which professionals work encourage or discourage good work. In our terms, genetics is well-aligned at the present time. The geneticists themselves, the scientific credo, the principal institutions, the shareholders of for-profit companies, and the general public all seek quality research that cures or alleviates disease and that leads to a longer and healthier lives. When an individual is working in a well-aligned profession, it is easier to do good work because the "signals" sent out by the different parties are consistent with one another.

Journalism, on the other hand, emerges as a misaligned domain. Journalists find that their own goals as professionals conflict at once with those of two powerful parties: the owners and managers of their outlets, rarely trained in journalism, who seek ever greater profits each quarter; and their shrinking audience, which spurns topics of depth and complexity in favor of stories that are sensational--"if it bleeds, it leads." Most journalists are pessimistic about the future of their profession; they look back to a Golden Age. In contrast to geneticists, many wish that they could change their profession. Referring to the overwhelming power of market factors, one news analyst told us, "The media are an early warning sign. What happens there forecasts what will happen elsewhere."

Yet our findings go well beyond a "good news/bad news" scenario. History suggests that alignments and misalignments are temporary. Misalignments can serve as wake-up calls; and indeed, many groups of journalists have sprung up in recent years in an effort to affirm the basic values of the profession and to differentiate themselves from gossip-mongers like Matt Drudge or from columnists who blur fact and fiction, like one-time Boston Globe writers Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle. Organizations like the Pew Committee of Concerned Journalists, with whom we have been working, have found a receptive audience in newsrooms across the country.

From an opposite perspective, apparent alignment can occlude danger spots that need to be identified. So many geneticists are "on a roll" that the profession may be insensitive

to troubling trends: the blurring of the line between science and commerce; pressures to favor treatments and cures that may benefit the company in which the scientist is an executive or large shareholder; insensitivity to the genuine moral qualms that citizens may have about stem-cell research or cloning. Should these signs be ignored, geneticists may discover that their "Golden Age" is as shortlived as that of physics in the years following the detonation of nuclear weapons over Japan.

Overall, we conclude that good work may be elusive in certain professions, particularly at times when the various stakeholders find themselves at odds with one another. Yet we take heart from two phenomena. First, there are always individuals and groups that want to carry out good work and that are energized by the seemingly Sisyphean dimensions of the task. Over the last twenty years, CNN, C-Span, National Public Radio and Frances Lappé's American News Source all stand out as journalistic outposts that have gathered together more than their share of Good Workers. The voluntary moratorium on recombinant DNA research called by leading scientists in the 1970s and the founding of institutions like the Council on Responsible Genetics are comparable instances from genetics. Second, we have found that the effort to carry out good work can be tremendously rewarding. Even though good workers often fail, they can be motivated by failures to try again and perhaps succeed. Jean Monnet, the inspiration of the European Union, remarked "I regard every defeat as an opportunity." Many of our subjects told us that they are working to bring about changes that may take fifty years to come to fruition. So long as individuals like this do not lose heart, we can anticipate that they--and the professions from which they are drawn--will be able to pass the mirror test.