

What Doesn't Seem Like Work?

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My father is a mathematician. For most of my childhood he worked for Westinghouse, modelling nuclear reactors.

He was one of those lucky people who know early on what they want to do. When you talk to him about his childhood, there's a clear watershed at about age 12, when he "got interested in maths."

He grew up in the small Welsh seacoast town of Pwllheli. As we retraced his walk to school on Google Street View, he said that it had been nice growing up in the country.

"Didn't it get boring when you got to be about 15?" I asked.

"No," he said, "by then I was interested in maths."

In another conversation he told me that what he really liked was solving problems. To me the exercises at the end of each chapter in a math textbook represent work, or at best a way to reinforce what you learned in that chapter. To him the problems were the reward. The text of each chapter was just some advice about solving them. He said that as soon as he got a new textbook he'd immediately work out all the problems — to the slight annoyance of his teacher, since the class was supposed to work through the book gradually.

Few people know so early or so certainly what they want to work on. But talking to my father reminded me of a heuristic the rest of us can use. If something that seems like work to other people doesn't seem like work to you, that's something you're well suited for. For example, a lot of programmers I know, including me, actually like debugging. It's not something people tend to volunteer; one

likes it the way one likes popping zits. But you may have to like debugging to like programming, considering the degree to which programming consists of it.

The stranger your tastes seem to other people, the stronger evidence they probably are of what you should do. When I was in college I used to write papers for my friends. It was quite interesting to write a paper for a class I wasn't taking. Plus they were always so relieved.

It seemed curious that the same task could be painful to one person and pleasant to another, but I didn't realize at the time what this imbalance implied, because I wasn't looking for it. I didn't realize how hard it can be to decide what you should work on, and that you sometimes have to figure it out from subtle clues, like a detective solving a case in a mystery novel. So I bet it would help a lot of people to ask themselves about this explicitly. What seems like work to other people that doesn't seem like work to you?

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